

**PAGEANTRY, POODLES AND PERFORMANCE:  
Camp Strategies in the Early Work of General Idea**

by

ISABELA C. VARELA

B.A., University of Alberta, 1996

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 2001

©Isabela C. Varela, 2001

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Date April 10, 2001

## Abstract

Formed in Toronto in 1969, the trio of artists known as General Idea developed a body of work focused on the construction of fictive identities and elaborate mythologies parodying the popular myths of art and the artist: the artist as genius, celebrity and avant-garde rebel. It is often said that General Idea's work is at its core an inquiry into art's methods of production, dissemination and reception – an example of the tendency in Western art of the 1960s and '70s towards the dematerialization of the art object and the critique of art's institutions. In this thesis, I argue that General Idea's work also demands to be seen on a broader level, as an exploration of artifice and the manipulation of conventional codes in everyday life. I maintain that, above and beyond their critical interest in art and pop culture, G.I.'s project was to reveal and question the most fundamental social conventions of all: gender and identity.

Through their use of pseudonyms, fictive identities, pageants and performances, General Idea invite us to consider the masks we wear, the poses we assume and the identities we perform even in our most banal moments, through bodily gestures, speech acts and the manipulation of surfaces. A project like *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* – staged at a time when normative gender roles and sexual identities were being called into question by the Gay Liberation Movement and the feminist movement – suggests an awareness on the part of General Idea of the constructed nature of identity and gender (a notion later popularized in academic discourse and cultural practice of the 1980s and '90s).

General Idea's artistic collaboration spanned more than twenty-five years, but it is the period from the early 1970s to the mid-'80s that constitutes the focus of this thesis. I argue that the boundaries separating masculine and feminine, straight and gay, fact and fiction, are complicated and challenged most effectively in the first two phases of their collaboration. The first phase is typically described as General Idea's "conceptual" phase because of the ephemeral, idea-based nature of the work. It can be said to begin with *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* and end with the symbolic arson of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* in 1977. The second phase, marked by a proliferation of poodle imagery in a variety of media, followed hot on the heels of the torching of the *Pavillion* and continued until the mid-1980s. Although the shift from "conceptual" art to a more material art object necessarily entails a shift in strategies of

representation, I argue that both phases of artistic production rely on visual and verbal signifying practices broadly defined as Camp. At a time when it had fallen out of favour as a viable form of self-expression in politicized gay communities, Camp was taken up by General Idea as both a critical tool and a key to attaining visibility – a ticket to ride and a strategic kick in the ass of the dominant order.



## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of Illustrations .....	v
Acknowledgements .....	ix
Introduction: "I advance, point to my mask" .....	1
Part 1: Straining for subversion within complicity .....	11
Part 2: The artist as drag queen .....	35
Part 3: "Behold the poodle, banal and effete ..." .....	62
Epilogue: The artist as ... Joker? .....	75
Works Cited .....	85
Appendix: Illustrations .....	91

## List of Illustrations

1. General Idea, Cover of *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue", vol. 3, no. 1 (autumn 1975).  
Offset periodical. 35.5 x 28 cm. Edition size unknown (between 1, 500 and 3, 500).  
Published by Art Official Inc., Toronto. Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.
2. General Idea, *Ideas Are Easy*, *FILE Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 1 (15 April 1972). Offset periodical. 35.5 x 28 cm. Edition of 3, 000. Published by Art Official Inc., Toronto.  
Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.
3. General Idea, *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Poster*, 1971. Offset on paper. 101.6 x 66 cm. Signed and numbered edition of 10. Self-published. Collection of General Idea, Toronto. Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.
4. General Idea, *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia: A Mural Fragment from the Room with the Unknown Function in the Villa dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1982.  
Enamel on plasterboard and plywood, five panels each 224 x 122 cm. Collection of the University of Lethbridge. Reproduced in Bringhurst, Robert, et al, eds. *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983.
5. General Idea, spread from "Women's Pages," *FILE Magazine*, vol. 1, nos. 2/3 (May/June 1972). Offset periodical. 35.5 x 28 cm. Edition of 3, 000. Published by Art Official Inc., Toronto. Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.

6. Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1973. Medium unknown. Dimensions unknown. Reproduced in *Tom of Finland Museum en Español*. 10 Mar. 2001  
<<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Stonewall/3415/coleccion.html>>.
7. Fred W. McDarrah and Timothy S. McDarrah, *Spectators at the Castro Street Fair*, 1981.  
McDarrah, Fred W., and Timothy S. McDarrah. *Gay Pride: Photographs from Stonewall to Today*. Chicago: a cappella books, 1994.
8. Vincent Trasov et al, *Mr. Peanut with Art Rat and Candy Man* and *Mr. Peanut with the Brute Saxs* (excerpts from the Mr. Peanut mayoralty campaign, Vancouver), 1974. Reproduced in Bringhurst, Robert, et al, eds. *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983.
9. Rodney Werden, *Portrait of General Idea*, 1974. Black and white photograph. 39.8 x 50.2 cm. Collection of General Idea, Toronto. Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.
10. Vincent Trasov, *Marcel Dot*, entry for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971. Black and white photograph. 101.9 x 76.3 cm. Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.
11. Photographer unknown. An example of “glamour drag”, female impersonator Skip Arnold. Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972.
12. General Idea, *Untitled*, Sandy Stagg models *The Miss General Idea Shoe* and the *Hand of the Spirit* against the backdrop of *Luxon V.B.*, 1973-74. Medium unknown. Dimensions unknown. Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.

13. General Idea, Cover of the first issue of *FILE Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 1 (15 April 1972). Offset periodical. 35.5 x 28 cm. Edition of 3, 000. Published by Art Official Inc., Toronto.  
Reproduced in Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.
14. Michael Morris, *Vincent Trasov*, entry for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971.  
Black and white photograph. 101.9 x 76.3 cm. Courtesy of Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC, Vancouver.
15. Michael Morris, *Vincent Trasov* (sideways view), entry for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971. Black and white photograph. 101.9 x 76.3 cm. Courtesy of Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC, Vancouver.
16. Donatello, *David*, c. 1440. Bronze. Height 62 ¼". Bargello, Florence. Reproduced in Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1987.
17. Michael Morris, *Vincent Trasov* (rear view), entry for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971. Black and white photograph. 101.9 x 76.3 cm. Courtesy of Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC, Vancouver.
18. Man Ray, *Rose Sélavy*, 1923. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions unknown. Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Samuel S. White III and Vera White Collection. Reproduced in Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
19. Art Gallery of Ontario. Cover of *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997. Originally produced as: General Idea, *The Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*, 1971. Screenprint on brown latex rubber. 99 x 79 cm.

20. *Untitled*, photo-documentation of *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, 1978. Performance presented at the *Fifth Network/Cinquième Réseau* conference, Toronto. Reproduced in Bronson, AA, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, eds. *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984.
21. General Idea, photo-documentation of *The Ruins of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1977. Performance/outdoor installation presented at Kingston, Ontario. Reproduced in Bronson, AA, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, eds. *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984.
22. General Idea, Invitation for *Reconstructing Futures*, 1978. Medium unknown. 14.75 x 10.25 cm.
23. General Idea, *Toronto's Fault: The First Tremors (The Ruins of the Silver Bar from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion)*, 1981. Outdoor installation presented at King and Bathurst Streets in Toronto, part of the Terminal Building Project financed by A Space. Reproduced in Bronson, AA, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, eds. *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984.
24. General Idea, Cover of *FILE Magazine*, "Mondo Cane Kama Sutra Issue", vol. 5, no. 4 (1983). Offset periodical. 35.5 x 28 cm. Edition size unknown (between 1, 500 and 3, 500). Published by Art Official Inc., Toronto. Reproduced in Bronson, AA, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, eds. *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost I want to thank John O'Brian, who contributed his invaluable criticism and support to this work from its inception in his graduate seminar on Conceptual Art to its completion as my Master's thesis. I am indebted to him not only for his patience and guidance, but also for his constant good cheer. I also wish to thank Serge Guilbaut, my second reader, for his insightful criticisms and contributions and the spirit of generosity with which he shared his ideas both within and without the classroom setting.

In conducting my research on General Idea, I relied on the archives and libraries of the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery at UBC, The Art Gallery of Ontario, The National Gallery of Canada, The Vancouver Art Gallery and Art Metropole in Toronto. At each institution, I was fortunate to benefit from helpful and knowledgeable staff. In particular, I must thank Timothy Savage, who introduced me to the Morris/Trasov Archive at the Belkin Gallery and Krisztina Laszlo, who provided me with photographs from *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Larry Pfaff and Randall Speller at the AGO; Peter Trepanier at the National Gallery; and Roger Bywater and Jordan at Art Metropole. Thanks must also go to Paul Freeman for his assistance in preparing the images for this thesis. I am especially thankful to AA Bronson for giving me access to the material in the General Idea Archive at Art Metropole, and to General Idea as a whole for producing the work that is the subject of this thesis.

This thesis would not have been possible without the immeasurable intellectual and emotional support of my sisters Alejandra and Maria Genoveva and my beloved mother, Sonia. They have influenced my work in ways that I cannot begin to adequately articulate and my gratitude for all that they have given me is boundless. I also owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my colleagues

in the Fine Arts Department and to the many friends I made during my residency at Green College, all of whom were always glad to offer helpful suggestions and encouragement when I needed them.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my beloved father, José Rolando Varela – who will always be not only my loving parent, but also my teacher, mentor, colleague and friend. A great man, generous professor and brilliant intellectual, his belief in me is the force that motivated and sustained me throughout this project and sustains me still. ... *el tiempo impone rectitud al testimonio de los que pierden y de los que ganan, pero incansablemente crece el árbol y muere el árbol y a la vida acude otro germen y todo continúa.* (Pablo Neruda)

***Introduction: "I advance, point to my mask"***

In the fall of 1975 the Toronto art collective known as General Idea published the "Glamour Issue" of their magazine, *FILE*. On the cover, a leg which appears to be that of a woman but could be that of a man dangles in front of Venetian blinds, clad in a black stocking and a shiny stiletto shoe. (Figure 1) A spotlight casts a strong shadow. The image is ambiguous and dramatic. Within the pages of this magazine, we find one of General Idea's most well-known and oft-quoted artistic treatises. Entitled simply "Glamour," it consists of seven, two-page spreads synthesizing General Idea's thoughts on fame, the myth of the artist and glamour, which they refer to as the "interface of nature and culture."<sup>1</sup> In typical General Idea style, the text consists of a series of enigmatic statements that claim to outline General Idea's strategies. It reads in part:

*What is artificiality? We knew in order to be artists and to be glamorous artists we had to be artificial and we were. We knew in order to be artificial we had to affect a false nature, disguising ourselves ineffectually as natural objects: businessmen, beauty queens, even artists themselves.*<sup>2</sup>

General Idea appear to wear their intentions on their sleeves, and yet, as curator and critic Philip Monk has pointed out, that in itself is one of their strategies. General Idea's game has always been a game of masks and disguises, smoke and mirrors – a game of things not being what they seem. But, rather than assume that General Idea's enunciations are elements of a larger strategy that is *not* explicitly stated, readers are compelled to collapse the enunciation and the strategy into each other and take the text at its word. As Monk observes, we "accept what the enunciation is actually saying with none of the irony its fictional and formal construction demands."<sup>3</sup>

General Idea's dictums are in fact highly ironic: veiled in opaque language, they gesture towards the meaningful, while at the same time winking at the audience as if to say "There is no truth here, everything is fiction. There is no depth, only surface."



In standard accounts of General Idea's history, the story begins in 1968, when young artists AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal moved into 78 Gerrard Street West a.k.a. the first General Idea Headquarters.<sup>4</sup> At the time of the move, there was no General Idea and no AA, Felix or Jorge Zontal – the trio began to use pseudonyms in the early 1970s and the collective entity of General Idea dates from the same time, but a crucial aspect of the G.I. project from its inception was the way it blurred the line between history and myth, fact and fiction.<sup>5</sup> The name General Idea works as a verbal pun on multiple levels, aimed at multiple targets. General Idea as a fictional corporation with global interests and ambitions is an allusion to General Electric, General Motors and General Foods and points to the commodity status of art, embraced in the postwar era by Andy Warhol and his Pop Art peers. General Idea as a military figure (G.I.) may be interpreted as an ironic reference to the destruction wrought by the Vietnam War and to the hyper-masculine ideal of men in combat.<sup>6</sup> Of course, in a sense, the members of General Idea *were* men at war (with the status quo), but their battle was of a decidedly different nature than the war waged by the Americans in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> And finally, the name General Idea is an ironic nod to early Conceptual artists whose dry and humourless “art propositions” were accompanied by sober, philosophical treatises about “art as idea.”<sup>8</sup> From the first issue of General Idea's *FILE Magazine*, which featured an altered found image with the motto “Ideas Are Easy,” Conceptual Art played the role of straight man to General Idea's queer persona. (Figure 2)

In the experimental Canadian art scene of the early 1970s, General Idea were not alone in their use of pseudonyms and their adoption of a mock-corporate collective identity. Several of their colleagues in the new Canadian artists' network – artists who saw themselves as posing alternatives to art's conventional modes of production and distribution – took on fictive personas like Mr. Peanut, Marcel Dot and Dr. Brute, as well as “corporate” names and identities like N.E.

Thing Co. and Image Bank. General Idea's work in the 1970s participated in the general artistic tendency in North America and Europe towards the dematerialization of the art object and the critique of art's institutions, while at the same time maintaining an ironic distance from the intellectual posturing of Conceptual Art, the grand imposing gestures of Land Art, and the often intensely personal and dangerous acts of Body Art. Through their insistence on playfulness, frivolity, glamour, desire and ambiguity, General Idea and their collaborators carved out a space of difference for themselves within an art world that seemed to be settling comfortably into its various camps.

In the early years of their collaboration General Idea established their new "headquarters" at 87 Yonge Street in Toronto, where they lived until 1973. In similar fashion to Andy Warhol's Factory, it drew a variety of artists and hangers-on with an interest in glamour, role-playing and the use of commercial and media strategies for the production of art.<sup>9</sup> These artistic explorations in Toronto also had close ties to the experimental art scene in Vancouver, led by collaborative ventures like Intermedia, Image Bank and the Western Front. For a country which, in the words of Scott Watson, had "until the 1960s neither an indigenous avant-gardism nor a cultivation of knowledge about such art in other countries," the late sixties and seventies were heady days indeed.<sup>10</sup> By all accounts, this moment was as close to sex, drugs and rock'n'roll as the Canadian art scene ever got. The network's frenetic pace of artistic production and experimentation was driven in part by the possibility of *being* that "indigenous" avant-garde with an international profile that had eluded Canada in the past, and their activity was partially fuelled by drugs, drink and sexual exploration.<sup>11</sup> This dedicated pursuit of the old avant-garde dream of "art as life/life as art" was well documented in General Idea's self-published "megazine", *FILE*. Through performances, installations, videos, photographs and the publication of *FILE*, General Idea constructed and circulated a tongue-in-cheek image of themselves as art world darlings

courting fame and fortune. In the “Glamour Issue” of *FILE Magazine*, they made their now familiar declaration: “We knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were artists and we would be. We did and we are. We are famous, glamorous artists.”<sup>12</sup>

General Idea’s early work focuses on the construction of fictive identities and elaborate mythologies which parody the popular myths of art and the artist: the artist as genius, visionary, avant-garde rebel and celebrity. Drawing on the visual and verbal vocabularies of both art and popular culture, G.I. establish a self-consciously fake structure through which they mimic “the interests and obsessions of the art world in particular, and the culture in general.”<sup>13</sup> If one phrase could sum up the work of General Idea as artists, authors and critics it might be the motto of the Roman actor which Roland Barthes invokes in *Le Degré Zéro de l’Écriture*: “larvatus prodeo” (“I advance, point to my mask”).<sup>14</sup>

It is often said that General Idea’s art is at its core an inquiry into the way art is produced and received.<sup>15</sup> I wish to argue that their work also demands to be seen on a broader level, as an exploration of artifice and the manipulation of conventional codes in *everyday* life. Through their use of pseudonyms, fictive identities, pageants and performances, General Idea invite us to consider the masks we wear, the poses we assume and the identities we perform even in our most banal moments, through bodily gestures, speech acts and the manipulation of surfaces. To advance and point to one’s mask is to point to one’s artificiality, to one’s awareness that (to paraphrase Oscar Wilde) “[b]eing natural is only a pose, and the most irritating one I know.”<sup>16</sup> It is to make manifest the performative, constructed aspect of identity and gender, a notion popularized in the past two decades in academic discourse and cultural practice.

Like many of their contemporaries, General Idea sought to playfully subvert the conventions of

art and consumer culture (an old goal of the avant-garde, in both its historical and neo-incarnations). But I want to suggest that, above and beyond this critical interest in art and pop culture, their project was to reveal and question the most fundamental social conventions of all: gender and identity. Although not without its weaknesses and inconsistencies, it was an ambitious project, to say the least, and one without parallel in the history of Canadian art. I will argue that the General Idea project still exerts a hold over us today, some thirty years after its inception, precisely because of its ability to speak of both the specific and the general at the same time. It speaks of one through the other, so that the *macrocosm* of late-twentieth-century Western society is revealed to us through a *microcosmic* re-presentation of the art world and its conventions, its institutions, its favorite myths.

For the purposes of this thesis, the General Idea project can be distilled down to the four “P”s: pageantry, poodles, performance and Pop. It is my contention that General Idea complicate and challenge normative conceptions of identity most effectively in the first two phases of their collaboration – from the early- to mid-1970s, and from the mid-‘70s to the mid-1980s – and it is this period of roughly fifteen years which I will consider here. The first phase is typically described as General Idea’s “conceptual” phase because of the ephemeral, idea-based nature of the work. This phase can be said to begin with *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* and end with the symbolic arson of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* in 1977. In keeping with the artistic tendency in the 1970s toward the dematerialization of the art object, much of General Idea’s early work surrounding *The Miss General Idea Pageant* is performance- and text-based.<sup>17</sup> (Figure 3) The second phase, or “poodle phase”, followed hot on the heels of the torching of the *Pavillion* and continued until the mid- eighties. Marked by a proliferation of poodle imagery in a variety of media, it is often described as G.I.’s “return to the notion of artmaking in a material form.”<sup>18</sup> (Figure 4) Although the shift from the “conceptual” to the material art object

necessarily entails a shift in strategies of representation, I maintain that both phases of artistic production rely on a set of signifying practices broadly defined as Camp and present the viewer with instances of queer performativity (the self-conscious construction and performance of queer identities).<sup>19</sup>

In its affinity for the flotsam and jetsam of pop culture, its love of artificiality, ambiguity, irony and performance, as well as its queer sexual content, General Idea's work evokes a particular set of signifying practices known as Camp. Camp is a slippery term whose meaning is constantly shifting with changes in social-historical context. When Susan Sontag wrote her influential essay, "Notes on 'Camp'" in 1964, she emphasized Camp's love of artifice and exaggeration, but minimized the link between Camp and queer identity. In recent decades, many critics and activists have argued that Camp is in fact a core element in the formation of queer identities and they have invested it with a sense of agency absent in Sontag's essay. For the purposes of this thesis, I conceive of Camp as both active and productive: it is a set of strategies for seeing, reading and doing, used by a subject to produce a *self-conscious and visible* queer identity, an identity which resists heteronormativity.<sup>20</sup> Camp enables a subject to actively engage with already existing discourses and images in the dominant culture and invest them with new, potentially subversive meaning.

General Idea's early work revolves around the rhetorical question quoted earlier: "What is artificiality?" By collapsing the boundaries between the real and the fictional, nature and culture, masculine and feminine, surface and substance, General Idea's fictive identities and elaborate mythologies invite us to consider the ways in which all identities are constructed. At its most productive, Camp has the potential to disrupt and destabilize dominant ways of thinking about gender, desire and sexual identity. By locating the production of identity in the visible and the

performative, Camp suggests that the subject has the potential to occupy a range of identities and escape the confines of a rigidly defined Self. A founding premise of my thesis is that, in their art, General Idea substitute a concept of the Self as unique, coherent and natural with a queer understanding of the Self as performative, provisional and situational.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, I suggest that G.I.'s early use of Camp strategies must be considered within its social-historical context, a context marked by the complex negotiations of gender and sexual identity that played themselves out in the wake of Pop, hippie culture, Women's Lib and the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s.

This thesis represents a departure from the existing critical discourse on General Idea, in which the prevalent approach is to discuss their work as an inside joke for and about the art world, a closed, self-referential system wrapped up in its own fictive constructs. I position myself against critics like Philip Monk, who describe General Idea's artistic practice as a formalized system that sacrifices history "in return for the construction of a self-history."<sup>22</sup> By insisting that General Idea's work "distance[s] itself from the real" and refers only to itself, Monk and other critics not only deny the work's location within a socio-historical context, they deny General Idea's agency as social subjects who draw from and contribute to a variety of discourses.<sup>23</sup> Given a body of criticism that largely denies the possibility of queerness in G.I.'s work, I want to argue for a re-reading of *The Miss General Idea Pageant* and the poodle imagery of the late '70s and early '80s. The goal is not to fix the meaning of these images, but rather to get beyond the heterosexual imperative that has limited discussion of General Idea's work. It is my intent to propose a more productive reading of these images as transgressive representations of decentred subjectivities, deregulated bodies and polymorphous desires. I will examine how General Idea use Camp as both a critical tool and a key to attaining visibility – a ticket to ride and a strategic kick in the ass of the dominant order.

<sup>1</sup> Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968 – 1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*, Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto: AGO, 1997) 106.

<sup>2</sup> General Idea, "Glamour," reprinted in *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*, eds. AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal (Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984) 88.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Monk, "Editorials: General Idea and the Myth of Inhabitation," reprinted in *Struggles with the Image: Essays in Art Criticism* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1988) 135-36. A writer for a free Toronto weekly summed it up succinctly when she observed that General Idea were experts at "scooping the critics by making commentaries on the art part of [their] work so that it was impossible to distinguish the product from what they kept saying about it." Susan G. Cole, "General art Idea," *NOW* 2-8 May 1985: 9.

<sup>4</sup> In "The Search for the Spirit," Fern Bayer explains that the three men actually began their collaboration in 1969, but decided early on to add an extra year to their collective history (that is, 1968) in order to explain the "crowning" of Mimi Paige and Granada Gazelle as Miss General Idea 1968 and 1969, respectively. Fern Bayer, "The Search for the Spirit," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*, Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto: AGO, 1997) 10.

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of clarity and consistency, Michael Tims, Ron Gabe and Jorge Saia will be referred to by their pseudonyms – AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, respectively – throughout this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> For most readers, the letters "G.I." will conjure up images of G.I. Joe, the "great American hero." Personally, I also make a more queer association, one that is loaded with possibilities. I am reminded of the Elvis Presley movie *G.I. Blues*, in which a young and beautiful Elvis plays a singing, hip-swivelling American G.I. There is an erotic appeal to the man in uniform, especially when that man looks like Elvis, and the eroticism is likely to reach across gender lines and sexual orientation. It is an open secret that homosexual activity (by which I mean, in the most literal sense, sexual activity between men) is rampant in especially "masculine" (or homosocial) areas such as the Army, contact sports and prisons. I like to think that when General Idea flirted with the notion of the G.I. in their role-playing, they had all of this and more in mind, and were not thinking exclusively of straight men going to war.

<sup>7</sup> In their early writings, G.I. make references to a fictional and antagonistic commander they call "The General" and describe themselves as "The General's followers," who must obey his orders. Fern Bayer puts this in context by relating it to the anti-military sentiments resulting from the Vietnam War, which spread north when American draft-dodgers fled to Canada in the late 1960s and early '70s. Bayer, "Uncovering" 54.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Joseph Kosuth, who in 1967 produced a work entitled *The First Investigation, (Art as Idea as Idea)*

which exemplified Conceptual Art's "aesthetic of administrative and legal organization" – an aesthetic which General Idea resisted in their own work. The description of Conceptual Art comes from Benjamin Buchloh. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 119.

<sup>9</sup> Bayer, "Uncovering" 51-52.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Watson, "Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive," *Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive*, UBC Fine Arts Gallery (Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1994) 8.

<sup>11</sup> Watson 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> General Idea, "Glamour" 77.

<sup>13</sup> Bayer, "The Search" 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Thody and Ann Course, *Barthes for Beginners*, ed. Richard Appignanesi (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1997) 77.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Fern Bayer writes: "At its core the work of General Idea is about art and how it is delivered. More than anything else, AA, Felix and Jorge were obsessed with how artistic information is transmitted through a culture." Bayer, "The Search" 11.

<sup>16</sup> Thody and Course 77.

<sup>17</sup> In many cases, all that remains of General Idea's early work is video and/or photo-documentation, correspondence, and oral and written accounts of their projects.

<sup>18</sup> Bayer, "The Search" 12.

<sup>19</sup> The third and final phase of General Idea's collaboration, which falls outside the scope of this thesis, is the *AIDS Project*, beginning in the late '80s and ending in 1994 with the deaths of Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz of AIDS-related illnesses. It is, of course, a crucial part of their body of work and one which deserves to be studied and written about at length in terms of, among other things, the thematization and representation of disease, melancholia, mourning and loss. Although not overtly political by ACT UP standards, the *AIDS Project* also stands as General Idea's most explicitly political work. To mention the *AIDS Project* in a footnote seems like a terrible injustice, which I can only justify by appealing to restrictions of time, space and subject-matter in this thesis. It should go without saying that all of General Idea's work informs this thesis, and I do not wish to leave the reader with the impression that the *AIDS Project* is yet another spectre in the story of G.I. which is being suppressed. Nor is it my



intention to suggest that AIDS is anything less than crucial in terms of discussing issues of queer identity and queer politics.

<sup>20</sup> In using the terms “queer,” “Camp” and “performativity” to describe General Idea’s work, I am aware that I may be guilty of historical slippage, applying the discourse of “queer theory” – whose emergence is usually traced to the late ‘80s and 1990s – to art that was produced over a decade earlier, in the heyday of the Gay Liberation Movement. I recognize that “homosexual,” “gay and lesbian” and “queer” are not synonyms, but rather changing terms used to define changing realities, however I also understand “queer” to be a critical term with an elastic sense of history, not strictly limited to specific cultural formations of the late ‘80s and ‘90s. Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York UP, 1996) 75. When I am quoting others, and when it is historically accurate to do so, I use the terms “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian,” but in my own writing I find “queer” to be a more useful term, because of its ambiguity and its inclusiveness, its refusal to fall into the “discrete gender categories embedded in the divided phrase ‘gay and lesbian.’” Moe Meyer, “Introduction: Reclaiming the discourse of Camp,” *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 2. In thinking about my academic interest in queer theory, I have found the following passage from Michael Warner’s introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* particularly helpful: “The preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. For academics, being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the publics from and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform. [...] people want to make theory queer, not just to have a theory about queers. For both academics and activists, ‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy.” Michael Warner, “Introduction,” *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) xxvi.

<sup>21</sup> Meyer, “Introduction” 3.

<sup>22</sup> Monk, “Editorials” 139.

<sup>23</sup> As I will discuss later, critics have been reluctant to discuss the aspects of G.I.’s work that seem to challenge sex – gender norms. Notable exceptions to this primarily heteronormative body of criticism are the writings of John Bentley Mays, Scott Watson and Robert Ballantyne, whose unpublished thesis written at UBC looks at issues of gay identity in relation to *FILE Magazine*.

*Part 1: Straining for subversion within complicity*

When General Idea appeared in 1969, emerging from Toronto's quasi-legendary Rochdale College and the primordial ooze of the late-sixties counterculture with its unbridled creativity, drug-fuelled optimism and failed revolutions, the critique of artistic institutions was all the rage among artists in North America and Europe.<sup>1</sup> Like talk of primitivism and the irrational in 1915 Parisian cafés, the language of institutional critique became common parlance among avant-gardist art practitioners in the '60s and '70s. Criticism of the art market and of the art object as fetish and commodity paved the way for Conceptual Art's dematerialization of the art object; the do-it-yourself collective spirit and anti-institutional stance of the sixties inspired the creation of artist-run centres as an alternative to public art museums and commercial galleries; and both Land Art and Body Art signalled a move away from the four walls of the studio or gallery – the former through a movement outward toward remote landscapes, and the latter by a movement inward, to the solitary body of the artist. Seen within this context, General Idea's early artistic endeavours seem wholly consistent with the questioning, critical and experimental mood of the times: their work was cheap, ephemeral and often performance-based; their material requirements were low; and their creative process was communal and collective. The trio were active participants in the flourishing correspondence art network of the early 1970s; worked in artist-run centres and established themselves early on as publishers and distributors of artists' books, videos and other ephemera; and their work examined the basic structures of art-making and the art world.<sup>2</sup> And yet ...

And yet any attempt to link General Idea to Conceptual Art, or Body Art, or Performance Art seems only to yield an unlikely pairing, an awkward fit. General Idea have always generated uneasiness among critics, who cannot quite define what it is that G.I. *do* and cannot make them sit comfortably within an art-historical continuum. This uneasiness is summed up by John

Bentley Mays in an article inspired by the group's 1984 retrospective:

*[ . . . ] we critics have never known quite what to do with General Idea. The combination of charm, calculation and flippancy in the artists' work seems to divide all who deal seriously with the group into opposed camps of fans and foes. Their audacity has always appeared too polite, or too sarcastic, or too uncritical or too campy or too something – never incisive, risky enough. [ . . . ] Their pose has always been that of artists too vain, gay, smart-assed and just plain smart to condescend to the level of ordinary political or art-world reality. Art critics, being earnest, moralistic, middle-class journalists for the most part, despise this kind of cynicism, and so find it easy just to dismiss or ignore the work of General Idea.<sup>3</sup>*

Arguably General Idea's most vocal and articulate supporter, John Bentley Mays hits the nail on the head in describing the criticism levelled at the group as a discourse that revolves around themes of excess and lack. Discussion around General Idea's work often focuses on their lack of earnestness and excessive frivolity, their apparent complicity with the structures they purport to critique, their ironic detachment, their lack of anger and their lack of "authenticity". Not coincidentally, the twinned themes of excess and lack are also central to the dominant order's traditional construction of homosexuality. In describing the popular perception of General Idea as artists who are "too campy," "too vain, gay, [and] smart-assed," Mays suggests that the "problem" that General Idea poses to some critics is one of frustrated expectations when it comes to the role of the artist. Though General Idea emerged in the late sixties, at a time when the tenets of Modernism had been largely discredited and displaced by the post-Abstract-Expressionist generation, art criticism – at least the sort that appeared in the popular press – continued to cling to assumptions rooted in Modernist theory, extolling the virtue of the "authentic" gesture, demanding "originality" from its artists, applauding formal rigour and expecting the aggressive masculinism of the Abstract Expressionists.

Criticism which purports to be exclusively about General Idea's artwork often alludes to their sexuality – a source of discomfort that is rarely openly explored and articulated and almost never

articulated well. For example, *Globe and Mail* art critic Gary Michael Dault, who complains that he “found the effete scene [General Idea] spawned inaccessible, and the work overly cool and ironic” is also driven to declare that, during visits to G.I.’s penthouse in Toronto, “I found it maddening trying to figure out who slept where and with whom.”<sup>4</sup> The critic leers at the spectacle/spectre of “gay sex” but fails to discern a productive relationship between the queer (and therefore difficult to categorize) identities performed by the three men and the art they produced. The result is all too familiar – criticism that is animated by sex but simultaneously evacuates sex from General Idea’s work constitutes a substantial amount of writing on the group.<sup>5</sup> Because it is implied but rarely explicitly addressed, the (queer) sexual identity of these artists becomes, to borrow the words of D.A. Miller in a slightly different context, “at once a remarkable and a remarkably pointless piece of information.”<sup>6</sup>

The popular and academic writing on General Idea often uses connotation, innuendo and double-entendre – the heterocentrist language of the closet – to simultaneously inscribe and erase (homo)sexuality from the group’s body of work, and by extension, from the actual physical bodies of AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal. “Effete,” “inaccessible,” “overly cool and ironic” – all words used by Gary Michael Dault to describe G.I. – are words that both infer General Idea’s sexuality from their art and impugn their art based on their sexuality. The word “effete” leaps off the page as a not-so-veiled reference to the queerness of General Idea, lest we forget that it refers to an inability to produce offspring (infertility); to something which is exhausted of vitality, force, or effectiveness; and, most pointedly, to that which is “[c]haracterized by unproductive self-indulgence, self-absorption, or decadence.”<sup>7</sup> In the early 1960s it was the Pop artist, as typified by Andy Warhol, who was described as “slick, effete, and chic” and whose art was labelled “flaccid” and “limp”.<sup>8</sup> Even today, there are those critics who describe Warhol as “[d]issolute, effete, frigid, indifferent, complacent, acquiescent”<sup>9</sup> for many of

the same reasons that General Idea are deemed self-indulgent, self-referential (a kinder way of saying self-absorbed?) and decadent, not to mention impotent. For what is really at the core of the label of “effete” is a judgment that this art dissatisfies because it fails to produce a phallic hero, because it frustrates expectations for a potent solitary genius whose art throbs with passion, anger, commitment and originality. From this perspective, General Idea’s work is arguably more of a travesty than Warhol’s because it is self-consciously, overtly collaborative (unlike Warhol’s art, which was executed by a number of people in the Factory but still attributed to the single visionary artist) *and* it laughs in the face of originality, borrowing shamelessly from the legacy of Warhol and the historical avant-garde.

As early as 1975, Gary Michael Dault, the same critic who would admit some twenty years later to obsessing over General Idea’s sleeping arrangements, criticized the group for being “[u]ndaunted by the fact that in presenting themselves as their own art objects they are a hundred years after the fact of French poet Charles Baudelaire who invented the attitude, about 75 years after Oscar Wilde who perfected it, and 15 years after Andy Warhol who made it pay [. . .].”<sup>10</sup> He went on to declare (rather prematurely) that “their love affair with suffocating self-definition and their dallying with atmospheres of vague fetid evil [. . .] is getting more arteriosclerotic and uninhabitable all the time. It’s a vein nobody can profitably mine any more.”<sup>11</sup> The implications are obvious: General Idea’s strategies are dismissed as lacking in originality and authenticity, thoroughly exhausted, ineffective and unwholesome. “Suffocating,” “fetid” and “arteriosclerotic” are words not often found in art criticism, and yet their use in this context goes a long way towards pathologizing General Idea and their work. Likewise, citing Baudelaire, Wilde and Warhol as the group’s progenitors, while certainly accurate, reads here as a heavy-handed way of alluding to General Idea’s sexual identity without acknowledging it openly. What the critic failed to understand was that, in “presenting themselves as their own art objects,”

General Idea were making no claims to originality or inventiveness, but were instead consciously aligning themselves with a specific avant-garde tradition – the tradition of the artist as dandy.

While admittedly a masculinist tradition, the pose of the dandy nevertheless proved useful to General Idea and others in their circle (as it did to Warhol before them) as a strategy to signal their difference from mainstream conceptions of masculinity and artistic selfhood. Just as Warhol's vacuous, superficial and deliberately self-effacing public persona was (and continues to be) widely understood as the antithesis of the swaggering masculinity of the Abstract Expressionists who came before him (in particular, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock), it can be argued that General Idea's self-conscious posturing as the glamour boys of the Canadian art scene was a reaction to what they perceived as a dry, humourless, decidedly *unsexy* art establishment.<sup>12</sup> Jorge Zontal was quoted on more than one occasion as saying that General Idea's tongue-in-cheek pursuit of fame, fortune and glamour was obviously "ludicrous in the Canadian art scene. Who had that? Harold Town?"<sup>13</sup> Posing as latter-day dandies was, for General Idea, a way to get attention in the basically regional and parochial art scene of Toronto in the 1960s. If the city's abstract artists indulged their fantasies of belonging to the same macho lineage as the Abstract Expressionists – "tool[ing] around town on motorcycles, drinking too much beer and chasing too many women"<sup>14</sup> – then General Idea claimed a different tradition for themselves, one with roots stretching back to the aesthetes, bohemians and proto-avant-gardists of the previous century. Whether we choose to call it Camp or dandyism, the fact is that both are historically specific manifestations of essentially the same counter-hegemonic impulse – to stand out from the mainstream, to resist the functionalism, narrowness and vulgarity of everyday life, and to express an oppositional sexual identity.<sup>15</sup>

But the way in which General Idea, as an art collective, chose to express an oppositional sexual

identity put them at odds with the politics of their time. One of the earliest examples of a writer addressing the relationship of General Idea's work to queer sexual identities is a scathing anonymous article, entitled "FILE: The Great Canadian Art Tragedy," which appeared in Vancouver's radical weekly newspaper *The Grape* in the summer of 1972.<sup>16</sup> Published mere months after the first issue of *FILE* was launched, the article blasted the group and their collaborators for not treating their "homosexuality" with the solemnity and political earnestness the author believed it deserved. Among the many charges it levelled against General Idea and co., the most interesting read:

*Shitting on their own homosexuality they have done an inestimable disservice by re-repressing what remains for many a serious and actual struggle within this society. They have paraded their homosexuality as though that in itself gave the mag. some bizarre status within the enigma of the alternate society. Instead the problems of homosexuality as an actual way of life recede into the pagentry [sic] of camp parody.*<sup>17</sup>

For this critic, what was at issue was not the fact that "homosexuality" had found its way into the pages of a nationally distributed art magazine, but rather that the "serious and actual" "problems of homosexuality" were trivialized through humour, frivolity and ironic detachment, or "camp parody." (Figure 5) It is a criticism in keeping with the burgeoning discourse of gay identity politics of the 1970s.

Following the symbolic birth of the Gay Liberation Movement at New York's Stonewall Inn in 1969, politicized gay communities began publishing their own journals.<sup>18</sup> The bulk of these publications, like Toronto's *The Body Politic* (launched in 1971); saw themselves first as radical tabloids "born of political conviction and a hunger for change" and gradually evolved to become community-centred papers focused on lobbying for legal and constitutional rights for gays, fighting discrimination based on sexual orientation and building supportive communities.<sup>19</sup> The

content of these journals or magazines differed substantially from that of General Idea's *FILE*, but that is to be expected given that *FILE* was not meant to be a Gay Liberation tabloid like *The Body Politic* nor a radical left newspaper like *The Grape* – it was a magazine by artists, for artists and about artists, and its political pretensions were few if any. Its content reflected an interest in community building of a different sort, bringing together as it did the projects, ephemera, passions, obsessions and concerns of art practitioners spread out throughout Canada and points further afield who were exploring alternatives to art's traditional modes of production and distribution. For that loose network of artists, *FILE* presented exciting possibilities in both its form and its content. The anonymous *Grape* critic wrote of the artists associated with *FILE* that “they have a politics which is not political,” by which I understand him to mean that they have a politics that is not rooted in the “real issues” and struggles of day to day life.<sup>20</sup> It is a legitimate claim, for General Idea never embraced overt, explicitly political content in their work, unlike other Canadian artists such as Joyce Wieland, Fastwürms and Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge.<sup>21</sup> A question for viewers of General Idea's work to consider – and it is a question that this thesis addresses – is whether or not art needs to be so explicitly *about* politics in order to *be* political. Can art that is so insistently preoccupied with what we identify as “superficial” – frivolity, pleasure, glamour and sexual play – at the same time advance a substantial critique of such fundamental social conventions as gender and identity? Can the visual and verbal strategies of Camp function as alternate forms of social resistance, or are these strategies so compromised, so dependent on the trappings of the dominant discourse they claim to challenge, that meaningful political and cultural critique becomes impossible?

In a similar vein to the critic from *The Grape*, albeit drawing upon more sophisticated critical tools, Philip Monk also argued that General Idea's interest in the construction of fictive identities, false histories and elaborate mythologies signalled a lack of engagement with the



“real.” Offering a structuralist reading of the General Idea project in the early ‘80s, Monk stated: “The fetishistic self-referential formality of this closed system has its consequences. In a system where signifiers exchange among themselves outside of any relation to a real or referent, no critique or reference can take place.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, General Idea’s body of work has multiple referents, specific and general, historical and contemporary. However, Monk chooses to represent the General Idea project as a closed system with “no referent other than its own construction and past history” and he does so, quite deliberately, to the exclusion of a more balanced approach to the work.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, he readily admits: “I could trace the influences on General Idea through the history of their work. But as I am talking of strategies, influence is a notion that only diverts us from examining the *form* of the strategy itself. It is on the level of form rather than content that this strategy in the end rests.”<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, Monk accuses G.I. of creating a mythology that lacks “any relation to a real or referent,” and on the other hand, he admits that there are influences to be traced in their work, but dismisses them outright because they do not fit into his particular critical agenda. It is only through a willful disavowal of the content of the work that Monk can argue that the General Idea project involves no critique or reference to something “real” outside of itself. For, truth be told, even a passing glance at General Idea’s body of work reveals that it is very much rooted in the “real” and that its content is marked by a surplus of referents or signifieds, a proliferation of meanings. The challenge that General Idea’s work presents to critics and the general public alike is that the multitude of referents and meanings it plays with creates ambiguity and offers no closure.

General Idea’s artistic production relies on two related visual-textual strategies, often associated with the articulation and representation of marginalized identities within a dominant order: Camp and irony. Linda Hutcheon defines irony as “a prime example of a discourse whose signs do not merely designate (single) things, but do much more: they create specifically doubled

meanings.”<sup>25</sup> Because both irony and Camp generate doubled or multiple meanings, they can be said to resist closure and disrupt any notion of meaning as singular, stable, decidable, complete, closed, innocent, or transparent.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Camp and irony undermine certainties and therefore have the potential to be oppositional, subversive and critical of the dominant order.<sup>27</sup> In order to function as signifying practices, both irony and Camp rely on a form of cognitive dissonance, on the perception of a discrepancy between what is spoken (or shown) and what is meant. They subvert discursive hierarchies by privileging the *unspoken* over the spoken, the implied over the declared.

In order to infiltrate the dominant discourse, those perceived as marginalized (by such things as sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, or class) must at times adopt disguises, masks, camouflage.<sup>28</sup> Irony and Camp function as coded modes of “speech” (in any medium), taking on the trappings of a dominant or official discourse while simultaneously resisting, challenging, or critiquing it. In this sense, Linda Hutcheon argues that irony offers a way to work within prevailing discourses and yet to contest them, “in perhaps covert but not ineffective ways.”<sup>29</sup> Hutcheon sees the ambivalence of irony at work in General Idea’s art and defines it as “complicit critique,” while G.I.’s own Jorge Zontal describes it more vividly as “straining for subversion within complicity.”<sup>30</sup>

Camp and irony are forms of coded “speech” and as such they are both inclusive and exclusive, they create outsiders and insiders. First, they assume a comprehending readership/viewership that knows of the existence of Camp and irony and understands that these strategies will somehow invert or undermine the meaning of what is being overtly communicated; second, they assume that the reader/viewer will be able to decode the ironic or Camp statement and grasp the intended, covert meaning.<sup>31</sup> There is a third assumption at play in the use of irony or Camp and

that is that not everyone will be “in on the secret.” In order to function as *coded*, ironic and Camp statements must be decipherable by some readers/viewers but not all. It is this quality of irony and Camp that leads some to label these strategies elitist and others to praise them as signifying practices that create communities.<sup>32</sup> In the particular case of General Idea and their network of collaborators in the 1970s (dubbed the Eternal Network), the proliferation of irony and Camp in their work served a number of purposes: it reinforced a sense of community, it referred back to certain strategies of the historical avant-garde, and it also reflected the covert ways in which queer sexuality and desire had to circulate in mainstream society. In other words, it mimicked the dynamics of closeted behaviour. With Pierre Trudeau, the dandified bachelor Prime Minister, running the country and the Stonewall Rebellion in New York bringing the Gay Liberation Movement into public consciousness, the times they were a-changin’, but not enough to embrace the hedonist tendencies of General Idea and the so-called Eternal Network. Camp and irony were therefore useful strategies for these artists, ensuring that what was “out” in the network was not necessarily out for the larger public.<sup>33</sup> When used by marginalized subjects within a dominant order, there is no question that irony and Camp serve a function of self-preservation – they are strategies of survival and celebration, allowing subjects to signal their difference and their opposition to the dominant order under the protective guise of familiarity and restraint. For General Idea in particular, these strategies allowed them to have their cake and eat it too – to be part of the art establishment while claiming to be outsiders, to be curator’s darlings, showing their work in prestigious galleries around the world while at the same time being described as “culture criminals.”<sup>34</sup>

Earlier, I discussed four examples of critical writing on General Idea, published at different points in the group’s career, in very different sorts of publications: a radical left weekly from the West Coast (*The Grape*), a mainstream newspaper from metro Toronto (Gary Michael Dault’s

1975 review in the *Toronto Star*), and a Canadian art magazine (essays in *Vanguard* by Philip Monk and John Bentley Mays). This is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of the existing literature on General Idea, nor is it my intention to leave readers with the impression that General Idea were reviled, dismissed or condemned by every critic who wrote about them. Rather, these examples are meant to give the reader a sense of the uneasiness, puzzlement and frustration that General Idea's work evokes in critics (even their "friendliest" critics) – that sense that, to paraphrase John Bentley Mays, G.I. "cannot be made to sit quietly in the art-historical continuum, or on a certain point along the right-left axis" because they are a little of one thing, a little of another, and in the end, not enough of either. Whether the criticism comes from the popular press, a leftist political journal, or theory-driven art criticism, there does seem to be a consensus in the discourse on General Idea's work that these artists are problematic because they lack originality and "authenticity," they lack both political and intellectual rigour, and their insistence on a pose of ironic distance and detachment makes their work inaccessible.

In all likelihood, this perceived "inaccessibility" that critics find off-putting is the result of General Idea's extensive use of irony and Camp. Both are strategies that refuse closure, judgment, or transparency and can result in texts (both visual and verbal) that seem "detached" or "overly cool and ironic."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most fundamental paradox in General Idea's work is that its use of Camp is that which gives it its greatest critical and creative strength and also that which makes it most vulnerable to attack, if not outright dismissal, by critics and viewers. As the General Idea project is one that embraces ambiguity, contradiction and multiple interpretations, a discussion of its critical reception cannot be framed in terms of "accurate", "inaccurate", "misunderstanding" and so forth. However, I do wish to argue that a *fuller* and more complex reading of General Idea's work hinges on an understanding of Camp signifying practices and the role they play in the General Idea project.

In order to understand why some critics have found General Idea's penchant for Camp to be lacking in political and intellectual rigour, we must first trace the trajectory that Camp has followed in the cultural imagination over the past four decades and the transformations it has undergone. In the early 1960s, as the popular press became fascinated with Pop Art in general and the artistic practice and persona of Andy Warhol in particular, the aesthetics of Pop and Camp were often confused and conflated. Pop was described in the press as playful, youthful and fashionable, an aesthetic that cut across high art and consumer culture. Capital "P" Pop (Art) and small "p" pop (culture) were seen as synonymous, and both were presented as the embodiment of the "spirit of Now."<sup>36</sup> When discussion focused on Andy Warhol's work in particular, Pop was characterized in terms of its feminine, consumerist and frivolous orientation. Camp – a notion that entered popular consciousness in the early '60s thanks in large part to Susan Sontag's now (in)famous essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" published in the *Partisan Review* in 1964 – was loosely defined as an aesthetic of artifice and excess, one that embraced the extravagant and the unnatural. The gay or queer implications of Camp and Pop were not often explicitly stated or explored, but more often circulated in the form of innuendo.<sup>37</sup> The popular press seized upon the figure of Andy Warhol in their efforts to define both Pop and Camp: journalists for such publications as the *New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Life* and *Newsweek* borrowed Sontag's definition of Camp and reformulated it around Warhol; likewise, when describing the spirit of fun and frivolity of mid-sixties America, the touchstones were Warhol and his Pop Art.

Most of the authors on Camp at that time, including Susan Sontag, located its *origins* in some sort of "homosexual subculture" but also took great pains to distance present-day Camp as they understood it from homosexuality. In 1965, a writer for the *New York Times* summed up the

new, mainstream definition of Camp, describing it as a “third stream of taste, entirely apart from good taste or bad taste, that encompasses the curious attraction that everyone – to some degree, at least – has for the bizarre, the unnatural, the artificial and the blatantly outrageous.”<sup>38</sup> Notice the emphatic assertion that Camp is an “attraction that *everyone*” has for the bizarre and so forth – this insistence that Camp was no longer specific to “homosexuals” was a recurring theme in the popular writing on Camp in the 1960s. In order for Camp to be palatable to mainstream audiences, it had to go through a process of redemptive heterosexualization.

In the enormously influential “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Susan Sontag emphasized Camp’s affinity for artifice and exaggeration and minimized the link between Camp and “homosexual” identity, thus opening it up to appropriation by the mainstream. By downplaying the obvious queerness of Camp, Sontag neutralized its oppositional possibilities and made Camp safe for public consumption. She conceded to a “peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality,” “a peculiar affinity and overlap,” while at the same time arguing that “it’s not true that Camp taste *is* homosexual taste.”<sup>39</sup> Her essay spawned a flurry of imitators, all of whom would either deny or downplay the productive relationship between Camp and queer identity. But in killing off what was the legitimate binding referent of Camp at that time – the Homosexual – writers were left with an unravelling discourse, a term whose definition was so hazy that it could function as all parts of speech, as noun, verb, adjective and adverb. Camp became confused and conflated with Pop and with rhetorical and performative strategies such as satire, burlesque and travesty.<sup>40</sup> In all the commotion, it seemed like the world had gone Camp – feather boas and Tiffany lamps were Camp, pulp novels were Camp, the *Batman* TV series was Camp, Pop Art was Camp, fashion was Camp, socialites were Camp and so on ...

Why the mainstream desire to appropriate Camp in the first place? For critics, it involved a

break with the past, an opportunity to embrace the youthful, celebratory and throwaway spirit of the times. According to Andrew Ross, “Camp in the U.S., at the moment that Sontag immortalized it, was an important break with the style and legitimacy of the old liberal intelligentsia, whose puritanism had always set it apart from the frivolous excesses of the ruling class.”<sup>41</sup> Camp allowed sixties intellectuals to “‘pass’ as subscribers to the throwaway Pop aesthetic, and thus as patrons of the attractive world of immediacy and disposability created by the culture industries in the postwar boom years.”<sup>42</sup> For the general public, Camp’s appeal no doubt lay in its association with the new and with things once repressed in conservative postwar American society: androgyny, extravagance, artifice, the bizarre and the highly mannered. It offered middle-class America a *frisson* of deviance, a touch of glamour and a glimpse of the “subcultural” and the “underground” – for example, the trashy, threadbare glamour of Andy Warhol’s Factory and the queer sexualities, mythologies and iconographies that were elaborated there, or the ambiguous sexuality of an effeminate and spaced-out Mick Jagger in *Performance*. Because Camp, like irony, depends on communities of understanding and thus creates outsiders and insiders, engaging with some version of Camp (no matter how watered-down and degraded from its origins as a form of queer self-expression) allowed those in the mainstream to feel like they were “in the know”. To this day, the invocation of Camp – typically in its most degraded forms, such as when the spectacle/spectre of a man in drag is used for laughs on a TV sitcom – allows those who identify with the dominant order to flirt with the Other and to feel the pleasure that comes from such “danger” and “rebellion”.<sup>43</sup>

Moe Meyer points to the publication of Susan Sontag’s essay as “the birth of the camp trace, or residual camp, a strategy of un-queer appropriation of queer praxis [...]”<sup>44</sup> What emerged from the mainstream colonization of Camp in the 1960s was the popular notion of Camp as a question of aesthetics, a sensibility, a function of taste – something almost ineffable, certainly something

without politics, and thus, a set of practices easily manipulated to suit all sorts of purposes and fit all kinds of contexts. The appropriation and redesignation of Camp by the mainstream minimized Camp's ties to its history as a form of queer self-expression and repressed Camp's critical potential. By defusing the power of Camp to act as cultural critique, "residual camp" denied the agency of the queer subject. But over the same period, Camp was also defined and redefined, disavowed and reclaimed by gay and queer subjects.<sup>45</sup> Prior to the emergence of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s, the politics of assimilation prevailed and the coded "speech" of Camp offered a way for closeted individuals to communicate with each other and signal their difference from the dominant order without fear of exposure. The Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 was a watershed moment for the politicization of gay and queer communities both in the U.S. and abroad – it marked the birth of a coherent and articulate movement that (at least in the beginning) rejected the strategies of assimilation in favour of the tactics of confrontation. A key concern in this new discourse of sexual politics was the question of visibility and the role it plays in the formation of a social identity. The Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s emphasized the importance of "coming out" – an unambiguous and public declaration of one's sexual identity – as a powerful way to challenge the heterosexist assumptions of mainstream society. Seen within the context of the Movement's promotion of empowerment through social visibility, Camp's emphasis on coded gestures, words and images – saying one thing, but meaning another – was seen by many newly politicized gays and queers as an unpleasant reminder of the pre-Liberation days of assimilation and self-negation. Despite the fact that the Stonewall riots were instigated by street fairies – young, poor cross-dressers for whom Camp was *literally* a survival strategy and who were so marginalized that they fought the police because they had nothing left to lose – Camp was often posed as an embarrassment to post-Stonewall gay culture.<sup>46</sup> In the early years of the Gay Liberation Movement, Camp's critical potential was not widely recognized and it was seen by many as a degrading display of



self-effacement and self-deprecation, driven by self-loathing.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing upon the example of the feminist movement, the Gay Liberation Movement insisted that the personal was political and articulated a substantial and influential critique of gender dichotomies and compulsory heterosexuality as oppressive constructs that needed to be denaturalized. However, this critique was not without its significant contradictions. The Movement advocated, on the one hand, the blurring of boundaries and the erasure of strict sex-gender dichotomies, while at the same time it clearly had (and continues to have) a great deal invested in maintaining the straight-gay dichotomy and defining what makes “gay” different from “straight”.<sup>48</sup> Issues of visibility and naming were central to the Liberationist agenda: it was argued that to name “gay identity”, to define it and make it visible, to take it out of the closet, was crucial to challenging heterosexism, homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality. But to name is also to fix, to confine, to keep in place, and more recent queer theory and gender studies argue for the need to resist naming, to resist a fixed identity and indeed to challenge the very idea of a secure identity. In hindsight, the politics of sexual identity articulated by the early Gay Liberation Movement seem limiting and essentialist but, to be fair, this is a function of most movements based on identity politics – by definition, their struggle for parity within the social structure and moral framework of the dominant order must be rooted in some stable identity. What this means, however, is that the Gay Liberation Movement – with its calls for “outing”, its crusade for social visibility, its desire to declare its sexual difference and challenge heterosexual privilege – ends up ultimately returning to just as static a notion of sexual identity as that which it was hoping to resist.

Camp offers a way out of the binary opposition of gay versus straight, and this explains (at least in part) why it was unpopular with the Gay Liberationists of the 1970s and continues to be so

with those who like their gender identities neat and tidy and who like to believe that sexual desire can be contained within two discrete categories and two categories *only*. Camp is a set of strategies for seeing, reading and doing, used by a subject to construct and perform a self-conscious and visible *queer* identity, an identity that resists not only heteronormativity, but what I would call *homonormativity* as well. Discredited and distorted through its appropriation by the mainstream in the 1960s, Camp had little currency in politicized gay circles when General Idea and their collaborators took it up as a critical and creative art-making strategy in the 1970s. In the past two decades the discourse of Camp has been reclaimed and rediscovered as “the vehicle for an already existent – though obscured – cultural critique.”<sup>49</sup> Camp is rooted in a queer understanding of the Self as performative, provisional and situational, rather than the conventional wisdom that one’s identity or Self is something *essential* and *natural*, that remains the same from the cradle to the grave. Thus, the categories which we typically never question – man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual – are revealed as social constructions, the *effects* of a constant series of performances which we are all taught to execute from birth to create the illusion of an abiding, “normally” gendered and “normally” sexed Self.<sup>50</sup> By locating the production of identity in the visible and the performative, Camp opens up exciting possibilities: the possibility that biology is not destiny, that we have the potential to occupy a range of identities and escape the confines of a rigidly defined Self. It is this productive definition of Camp that informs my discussion of General Idea’s work: Camp as a set of signifying practices that complicate our understanding of identity in general, and gender, desire and sexual identity in particular.

The birth of General Idea in 1969 coincided with the symbolic birth of the Gay Liberation Movement at Stonewall. With gay identity politics taking up their place in the cultural consciousness of the times, alongside the social phenomena of recreational drug use, Women’s

Lib, sexual freedom, communal living, and other leftovers from the sixties counterculture, General Idea and their collaborators opted to recuperate Camp as a tool for art-making and cultural critique. To the Toronto art community and the staid Canadian art world in general, General Idea presented themselves as avant-garde dandies in scenes dominated by either the macho posturing of the local disciples of Abstract Expressionism or the sexless intellectual pretensions of Conceptual Art.<sup>51</sup> In art circles, AA, Felix and Jorge were constantly referred to as “the boys”: a nickname that, on the one hand, alludes to eternal youth and hipness and sounds like a term of endearment and, on the other hand, implies a dismissive attitude, an assertion that these are *boys*, not *men*. There is a third connotation to the label of “boys”, and that is to gay hustlers, or more generally, young men who have sex with other (typically older) men – one thinks, for example, of the “boy brothels” of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe or the “rent boys” found today in cities all over the world. The queer poses adopted by General Idea and their collaborators were widely understood as signifiers of their “gayness”, but they were by no means more accommodating to the demands of early gay identity politics than they were to the dominant order.

The array of publications that proliferated in the era of Gay Liberation constructed and circulated – and in that way, popularized and naturalized – a very particular image of the Gay Man. This image was aggressively “masculine” (the ideal of the gay “clone”, who resembles a Tom of Finland drawing brought to life), overtly sexual, phallocentric and aligned with a politics of identity which, while it purported to subvert rigid gender norms, actually shaped and maintained equally rigid identities.<sup>52</sup> (Figures 6 and 7) In defiance of this model of gay masculinity that dominated in gay communities by the mid-‘70s, General Idea embraced the more ambiguous figure of the cool, self-contained dandy, with an interest in glamour, androgyny, surface decoration and aestheticism. They deliberately took up and flaunted some of the most common

and pernicious stereotypes of gay masculinity, such as narcissism, frivolity and “sissiness” (for example, their interest in beauty pageants and poodles), thus ensuring that they would irritate both straight and gay mainstreams. They were dandies in an age of “clones”, queer outsiders claiming a space outside or beyond the straight and gay mainstreams with their fantastical costumes, fictive personas and *noms de plumes*. (Figures 8 and 9) Fundamental questions that dominate postmodern artistic and academic practice today, such as the relation between “culture” and “nature” in the construction of sexuality and gender identity, were on the General Idea agenda as early as 1971. With what seems like remarkable prescience, General Idea’s art put the politics and poetics of Camp to work in an exploration of cultural clichés, social conventions and the masks we wear in everyday life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rochdale College was a free university located in an 18-story high-rise on Bloor Street, at the edge of the University of Toronto campus. Housing some 800 people at a time, it was the largest co-operative student residence in North America, the largest of the more than 300 free universities on the continent, and eventually, it became known as the largest “drug supermarket” in North America. David Sharpe, *Rochdale: The Runaway College*, 31 July 2000 <<http://write-sight.com/wordshop/rochdale.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> With the help of a Canada Council grant, General Idea established Art Metropole as an artist-run centre in 1974. In the December 1973 issue of *FILE Magazine*, General Idea wrote: “Art Metropole intends to keep abreast of the tide, housing and distributing evidence of activity and imagery: megazines, publications, videos, correspondence, snapshots, memories, and the ephemeral flood ...” Bayer, “Uncovering” 101. The centre officially opened to the public on October 26, 1974, and remains an active publisher and distributor of artwork.

<sup>3</sup> John Bentley Mays, “Must We Burn General Idea?” *Vanguard* Nov. 1984: 11.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Robert Collison, “Party of three,” *Saturday Night* Sep. 1995: 87-88.

<sup>5</sup> The use of a sexually loaded vocabulary (and one which carries with it the stigma of deviant or outlaw sex) to describe the trio’s artistic practice is not unlike the “rhetoric of prostitution” which Jennifer Doyle identifies as a hallmark of the critical writing on Andy Warhol. Many of Doyle’s observations on the latter could just as easily be applied to the former, for example: “Critics will hint at Warhol’s sexuality as being in relation to his work (by, for example, invoking Oscar Wilde as a figure with a similar understanding of celebrity) and will suggest, in effect, that

Warhol's work is all about sex, but they will nevertheless stubbornly refuse to make either inference explicit."

Jennifer Doyle, "Tricks of the Trade: Pop Art/Pop Sex," *Pop Out Queer Warhol*, eds. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley and José Esteban Muñoz. (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 192.

<sup>6</sup> Miller's statement occurs within the context of his essay on Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* and the homosexuality of the fictional film's two protagonists – an essay which is useful in its elaboration of how connotation functions as "the dominant signifying practice of homophobia." D.A. Miller, "Anal Rope," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991) 121, 125.

<sup>7</sup> "Effete," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Morris (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Selz, "The Flaccid Art," reprinted in *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Mahusen (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989) 77-82. This article was originally published as "Pop Goes the Artist" in the *Partisan Review* in the Summer of 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Doyle 195.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Michael Dault, "3 trendy young men market themselves," *Toronto Star* 3 Nov. 1975: D8.

<sup>11</sup> Dault D8.

<sup>12</sup> Examples of contemporary critical writing on Andy Warhol's queer persona in relation to the overbearing masculinity of the Abstract Expressionists include: David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945 – 2000* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000); Kenneth E. Silver, "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art," *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992); and Cécile Whiting, *A Taste For Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Jay Scott, "Going Through the Notions," *Canadian Art* (Fall 1984): 81. Describing the cultural environment of Toronto pre-General Idea, John Bentley Mays writes: "When General Idea began working in Toronto, not even the most uncritical chauvinist would have been inclined to view the home town as the vivid centre of anything. By and large, especially in matters of art and culture, it was still a provincial backwater with pretensions." John Bentley Mays, "The Snakes in the Garden: The Self and the City in Contemporary Canadian Art," *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*, eds. Robert Brighurst et al. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983) 173.

<sup>14</sup> Collison 88.

<sup>15</sup> In her essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" published in 1964, Susan Sontag declared: "Camp is the solution to the problem:

how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture.” Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966) 288. Indeed, the parallels between Camp and dandyism are clear. Both are often described as sensibilities or affectations, marked by a love of exaggeration, artifice and frivolity; both are seen as belonging to the realm of the aesthete, the individual with a superior appreciation for art, fashion, literature, and so forth; both are associated with the conspicuous consumption of cultural products, although for the 19<sup>th</sup> century dandy the goal was to acquire that which was rare and inaccessible to the larger mass of consumers, while in the case of Camp, the individual is more likely to be interested in recuperating objects from popular culture that have lost their lustre and imbuing them with the glamour of resurrection. It is worth pointing out that while the figure of the dandy is typically (biologically) male, there are also well-known instances of women, like the lesbian artist Romaine Brooks, who would cross-dress as dandies as a way to reject the narrowness of the role of “woman.”

<sup>16</sup> The popular assumption was that the “anonymous” critic was Dennis Wheeler, an artist, filmmaker and “art-community insider” who, at the time the article was published, was a recent graduate from the M.A. Art History program at UBC and worked at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Bayer, “Uncovering” 80. Robert Ballantyne, “Glamour, Pageantry and Knives: Gay Identity in *File Magazine*,” diss., U of British Columbia, 1994, 1.

<sup>17</sup> “FILE: The Great Canadian Art Tragedy,” *The Grape* 24-30 May 1972: n. pag.

<sup>18</sup> The editors of *The Body Politic*, the most prominent publication to emerge from the Gay Liberation Movement in Canada, explain the importance of the Stonewall riots as follows: “It was the year that street queens and other bar-goers responded in an unexpected way to an harassment visit by New York policemen to a Greenwich Village bar on Christopher Street called the Stonewall Inn. The customers fought back, demonstrated, threw things at the police, distributed flyers and experienced, for the first time, the astonishing sensation of resistance. The match, once struck, ignited a movement.” Ed Jackson and Stan Persky, eds., “Introduction,” *Flaunting It! A decade of gay journalism from The Body Politic* (Toronto: Pink Triangle Press, 1982) 1.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson and Persky 2.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, he expresses disappointment that the magazine does not bother to mention “the struggle of Canadian artists to unionize through C.A.R., Canadian Artists Representation,” and that it misses the opportunity to “‘raise’ the collective consciousness of artists all across the country.” “FILE: The Great Canadian Art Tragedy.”

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of the work of Condé and Beveridge in Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Philip Monk, “Colony, Commodity and Copyright: Reference and Self-Reference in Canadian Art,” reprinted in

---

*Struggles with the Image: Essays in Art Criticism* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1988) 100.

<sup>23</sup> Monk, "Colony" 101.

<sup>24</sup> Monk, "Editorials" 137. Italics in original text.

<sup>25</sup> Hutcheon 10.

<sup>26</sup> Hutcheon 12.

<sup>27</sup> In her book on the use of irony in contemporary Canadian art and literature, Linda Hutcheon deals directly with the work of General Idea and argues that they "use irony as a primary linguistic and structural device to point beyond the slippery nature of language to the incongruities of our culture and our society at large." Hutcheon 28.

<sup>28</sup> General Idea describe these signifying practices as "mutated strategems [sic], battlestances disguised as dance steps." General Idea, "Glamour" 88.

<sup>29</sup> Hutcheon 99.

<sup>30</sup> Hutcheon 134. Scott 82.

<sup>31</sup> Hutcheon 11.

<sup>32</sup> Hutcheon 11.

<sup>33</sup> Watson 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> In the catalogue for General Idea's 1984 retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery, curator Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker celebrates G.I. as "culture criminals" – a claim which prompts John Bentley Mays to respond: "They are nothing of the sort. Such language is hype, not criticism. It will bring no-one any closer to an understanding of what we admire and value in the work of General Idea." Mays, "Must We Burn" 11.

<sup>35</sup> The inherent ambivalence of Camp and irony as signifying practices is directly related to what was known as "Pop cool" in the early 1960s. Andrew Ross writes: "In principle, Pop "cool" was neither exactly complicit or dissenting, since it was based on an outright refusal of the act of judgment." Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 150.

<sup>36</sup> Cécile Whiting, *A Taste For Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 177-178, 179-180. The definition of Pop as the embodiment of the "spirit of Now" comes from an article by Gloria Steinem published in *Life* magazine in 1965 entitled "The Ins and Outs of Pop Culture." Whiting emphasizes that this *popular* understanding of Warhol's work and Pop Art in general contradicted the view of Pop Art then gaining prominence among art critics. She refers to Lucy Lippard and others who distanced Pop from Camp and consumer culture by claiming that it embodied a "cool," formalist approach to the visual. Whiting 180.

<sup>37</sup> Whiting cites one exception to this rule, an article by Vivian Gornick entitled "It's a Queer Hand Stoking the Campfire," that claimed to bring Camp "out of the closet," aligning the apparently new aesthetic that Warhol represented with homosexuality. As the title suggests, the article was explicitly homophobic and misogynistic, casting Camp as the product of a homosexual "sensibility" based on bad feminine taste. The article appeared in 1966 in *The Village Voice*. Whiting 178-179.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Meehan, "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste - It's 'Camp,'" *New York Times Magazine* 21 Mar. 1965: 30. Quoted in Whiting 178.

<sup>39</sup> Sontag 290. Italics in original text. In light of her disavowal of the queerness in Camp, it seems all the more interesting that Sontag dedicated this essay to Oscar Wilde.

<sup>40</sup> Meyer, "Introduction" 7.

<sup>41</sup> Ross 147.

<sup>42</sup> Ross 136.

<sup>43</sup> Critic bell hooks describes this phenomenon as "eating the Other" and makes a compelling argument that "[t]he commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. [...] In many ways it is a contemporary revival of interest in the "primitive," with a distinctly postmodern slant." bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992) 21-22.

<sup>44</sup> Meyer, "Introduction" 5. Meyer makes a distinction between queer Camp, which he sees as the only legitimate form of Camp, and what he considers to be "residual camp." When referring to Camp as a politicized, solely queer discourse, Meyer uses an upper-case "C." When he refers to an un-queer, Pop culture version of Camp, a lower-case "c" is used.

<sup>45</sup> There have been arguments made for the existence of lesbian Camp, but typically, Camp is understood as a set of strategies used primarily by gay men and those who identify as queer (for example, cross-dressers and transgendered subjects).

<sup>46</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972) 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> In his preface to Philip Core's, *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth*, George Melly describes Camp as "the Stepin Fetchit of the leather bars." Quoted in Ross 144. Andrew Ross elaborates: "Like 'Jewish self-hatred,' or 'Tomming' in black culture, gay camp was arguably a form of defense constructed by an oppressed group out of conditions not of its own making. [...] From the point of view of gay liberation, camp could only be a survivalist



ethic, and never an oppositional critique." Ross 162-63.

<sup>48</sup> I would add that this aspect of the Movement also has a great deal invested in maintaining the dichotomies of male-female, lesbian-gay and gay-bisexual. As one queer critic explains: "For some, gay identity has become a sexual security blanket which is clutched tight at all times. Its loss would undermine the core of their being. They cling tenaciously to a sense of gayness, with all its connotations of invariable sexual difference, certainty and exclusivity." Peter Tatchell, "It's Just a Phase: Why Homosexuality is Doomed," *Anti-Gay*, ed. Mark Simpson (London: Freedom Editions, 1996) 46.

<sup>49</sup> Meyer, "Introduction" 7, 12. Moe Meyer cites the pioneering efforts of ACT UP, who "consciously and successfully brought Camp to bear on activist politics in its graphics," and Queer Nation, whose demonstrations rely on street theatre and Camp to disrupt and destabilize the systems of the dominant order. For example, Queer Nation ran a drag queen as their candidate for Chicago's mayoral election in 1991. The candidate, Joan Jett Blakk, whose slogans included "putting the Camp into campaign," highlighted divisions within gay and queer communities regarding the critical potential of Camp. Many involved in gay politics found the use of Camp as the foundation for a campaign both flippant and demeaning. Meyer, "Introduction" 6.

<sup>50</sup> This definition of gender has been elaborated by Judith Butler, who argues that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 270.

<sup>51</sup> As Robert Collison put it, "[t]o the macho brotherhood of abstract expressionists who then dominated the Toronto art scene, the Boys' dandified world was alien, otherworldly." Collison 88.

<sup>52</sup> "Clone" is a term used to describe those gay men who conform to the popular image of gay masculinity circulated in gay magazines, films, clubs, advertising and so forth. Particularly in the 1970s and '80s, the "clone" emulated an ideal of dominant masculinity taken to the extreme: muscular, tanned, hard-edged, eschewing any evidence of femininity, tenderness, or softness. Burly, bulky, hairy and unmistakably "male" bodies replaced the softer and more "effeminate" model of pre-Liberation gay masculinity. Today, the pendulum appears to have swung back and gay male iconography is once again embracing a softer, less extreme image of masculinity.

## ***Part 2: The artist as drag queen***

*This was an art to match and symbolize a mode of sexuality – as all art probably is in some final, psychoanalytical sense.*

- John Bentley Mays<sup>1</sup>

Visuality and performativity are central to Camp strategies of representation. From its earliest definition at the turn of the last century, to Susan Sontag's elaboration of the term in the early 1960s and the re-conception of the term in recent queer theory, definitions of Camp have always privileged the visual and the performative.<sup>2</sup> In the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, Wayne R. Dynes states that "Camp is not grounded in speech or writing as much as it is in gesture, performance, and public display. When it is verbal, it is expressed less through ... direct statement than through implication, innuendo, and intonation."<sup>3</sup> Another key element of Camp is its derivative nature, its use of already existing cultural material as a vehicle for its critique. But when it comes to Camp, not just any cultural material will do. Camp involves the retrieval and recuperation of objects and discourses of the past that have lost their lustre due to neglect and disdain – it appropriates the casualties of capitalism's "here-today-gone-tomorrow" culture of planned obsolescence and imbues them with the glamour of resurrection. Andrew Ross contends that Camp "generates its own kind of economy" based on this recycling of cultural material and, as such, it can be described as "the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*."<sup>4</sup> In order to situate General Idea's use of Camp within a larger art-historical context, it is important to point out that their affinity for appropriating mainstream cultural material and subverting its content is not without its significant precedents: Pop artists, the Situationist International, and artists of the historical avant-garde, such as the Dadaists and Surrealists, all experimented with mass cultural forms to blur the boundaries between art and everyday life.<sup>5</sup> However, two major considerations set General Idea's recuperation of discarded texts (in the

broadest sense of the term) apart from the work of their artistic progenitors: first, the materials they chose to appropriate tend to have sexual implications (for example, beauty pageants and found images from porn magazines); second, these appropriations are used as tools to articulate a queer identity, an ambiguously sexed identity that resists easy categorization.

The productive marriage of art and Camp in General Idea's work began with their mock beauty pageant, *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*. A parody of a familiar pop culture ritual, the event was conceived as a humorous critique of the art world and its rituals of production, distribution and legitimation. Combining elements of Conceptual Art, Performance Art and correspondence- or mail-art, the pageant culminated in an elaborate awards ceremony held at the Art Gallery of Ontario.<sup>6</sup> Planned and shot as a televised event, The Grand Awards Ceremony utilized all the cliché elements of the beauty pageant format for maximum verisimilitude: limousines and arriving celebrities; judges, contestants and an audience of nearly 400 people; a Master of Ceremonies (AA Bronson) and musical entertainment (Pascale, the "androgynous bomb of the Canadian art scene"); a farewell speech by the previous year's winner; and timed standing ovations.<sup>7</sup> This pageant is General Idea's creation myth, its Genesis, and its declaration of intent: to blur the boundaries that separate fact from fiction, history from myth, art from pop culture, masculine from feminine, queer from straight. With this pageant General Idea hit the conceptual mother lode: the allegorical figure of Miss General Idea is *the* big idea, the "framing device" that would structure their work for the next fifteen years.

One of the most well-known and intriguing images to emerge from the 1971 pageant is the portrait of Vancouver artist and Image Bank co-founder Michael Morris (known at the time by the pseudonym Marcel Dot) posing as *Miss General Idea*. (Figure 10) In this image we see several key elements of Camp at play: theatricality, the exaggerated gesture (posing), the use of

discarded cultural material, the stylization of the body for public display, and the subversion of normative gender categories. Marcel Dot submitted this photograph as part of his entry for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* and won, acquiring the title of *Miss General Idea 1971-1983* at the Grand Awards Ceremony (the judges praised him for “capturing ‘Glamour’ without falling into it”).<sup>8</sup> Like the mysterious image of the leg dangling in front of Venetian blinds, the portrait of Dot as the new “queen” of the Canadian art scene belongs to General Idea’s dossier of “borderline cases.”<sup>9</sup> The photograph functions as a repository for a number of concerns that are central to General Idea’s work: the destabilization of prevailing notions of gender, sexual identity and the Self; the inquiry into the basic structures of art-making and the art world through the construction of humorous counter-myths and counter-realities; and the use of Camp as a tool for cultural critique.

With the plexiglass *Hand of the Spirit* framing his chin in a dramatic pose and *The Miss General Idea Gown* gathered around his neck and falling to mid-thigh, Marcel Dot is a striking – and strikingly ambiguous – figure. The theatricality of the black-and-white portrait, with its sharp tonal contrasts and exaggerated pose, is evocative of glamour photography of the 1940s – but this is clearly glamour photography with a difference. While the genre is associated with artifice and the manipulation of surfaces, Dot’s angularity seems forced and unnatural beyond what is typical of such an image. In addition to the awkwardness of the pose, there is a historical ambiguity to this portrait that is disconcerting. Marcel Dot is a hybrid of by-gone styles: wearing a dress from the 1940s, he somehow manages to also evoke both the silent-film era and the late-Victorian period. As *Miss General Idea 1971-1983*, he literally *embodies* a decentred subjectivity whose social-historical context and gender identity are fluid, rather than fixed – he enacts a self-consciously queer identity that defies easy categorization.

So much of the way we read gender depends on the visual. When encountering a person of indeterminate gender, we typically look to visual cues or clues such as their clothing, the style of their hair, the absence or presence of make-up, and of course, their body (can we detect breasts, do they have an Adam's apple?), to aid in the assignment of gender. In the photograph of Marcel Dot as *Miss General Idea*, the visual cues associated with normative conceptions of the "masculine" and the "feminine" are held in tension, suggesting the displacement of rigid gender identities. His clothing and pose are adequate (though not wholly convincing) signifiers of "femininity", but they are acting upon a body marked as "masculine" by virtue of Dot's short hair, plain face, and sturdy, hairy legs. As an entry for a beauty pageant, even a *mock* beauty pageant, this is a bizarre and jarring image. While making claims to embody both glamour and "femininity" – the ideal attributes of the beauty queen – it actually parodies both through mimicry, exaggeration and cognitive dissonance.

As worn by Marcel Dot (or indeed, by anyone) the liver-coloured *Miss General Idea Gown* is more dowdy and unfashionable than glamorous, and Dot in no way approximates the stereotype of either the beauty queen or her queer equivalent, the drag queen. At first glance, the image of a man in a dress conjures up ideas of drag, but as this photograph makes clear, Marcel Dot/Michael Morris is an artist, not a drag queen, and his entry for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* is not an attempt to do serious drag. (Figure 11) In her groundbreaking anthropological study of female impersonators in the U.S., published in 1972, Esther Newton described "glamour" drag (also known as "serious" drag, as opposed to "comic" drag) as follows:

[. . .] *glamour means, ideally, a slender body with the appearance of large breasts and wide hips, a youthful face with "good" bone structure, skin that seems soft but is heavily and dramatically made-up, jewelry [. . .], a long-haired wig [. . .], a gown (preferably low-cut and floor length), and, invariably, high-heeled shoes.*<sup>10</sup>

As *Miss General Idea*, Dot wears no make-up, no wig, no high heels – all identified by Newton as necessary signifiers in the performance of femininity. His most important prop is a cut-out plastic hand known among General Idea and their collaborators as the *Hand of the Spirit*.

(Figure 12) The hand frames his face with a precious gesture, presenting it as a commodity on display, but it is also clearly a gesture associated with the stigma of effeminacy that has always been attached to gay men – the *Hand of the Spirit* is the “limp-wrist” of the “sissy”, “nelly” or “fag.”<sup>11</sup> Marcel Dot frustrates the expectations of glamour and glitz that are generated by the format of a beauty pageant, but I would argue that his queer performance of gender is all the more transgressive because it is *incomplete* and thus puts the “masculine” and the “feminine” in greater proximity to each other (and in greater tension) than is the norm with serious drag. Drag artists tend to dress over the top and exaggerate “feminine” characteristics (while masking the “masculine”) in order to simultaneously foreground their role-playing and create a satisfying illusion of “femininity.”<sup>12</sup> As an example of “unsanitized drag,” the image of Marcel Dot posing as *Miss General Idea* makes no attempt to create such a satisfying illusion: instead, it plays with certain signifying codes that typically produce “the illusion of an abiding gendered self”<sup>13</sup> and it renders those codes visibly unnatural. Once again, in reading this image, I am reminded of the motto of the Roman actor quoted earlier: “I advance, point to my mask.” As *Miss General Idea*, Marcel Dot performs a queer identity that does not yearn for authenticity, but rather revels in its own hybridity and artifice.

The photographs submitted by Marcel Dot for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* were taken by Vincent Trasov, another West Coast artist and co-founder of Image Bank, who assumed the identity of Mr. Peanut (the Planter’s mascot) in the 1970s and ran for mayor of Vancouver in 1974 using this fictive persona.<sup>14</sup> (Figure 13) Trasov also participated in General Idea’s pageant and attended the awards ceremony at the Art Gallery of Ontario, but the photographs he

submitted as his entry in the “contest” have rarely been reproduced in publications and, to my knowledge, have not been discussed anywhere in the discourse on General Idea.<sup>15</sup> Like the photos of Marcel Dot/ Michael Morris, the pictures of Trasov are Camp (in this case, the Camp factor comes from Trasov’s use of props associated with a well-worn pop culture icon, Mr. Peanut, in a completely queer context), but they are also frankly homoerotic in a way that those of Marcel Dot are not. In the photos where Trasov dons the “official” pageant gown, he is actually in the process of either putting it on or taking it off, pulling it over his head in a gesture that suggests both sexual availability and the masking of gender (for his face is hidden by the dress). (Figure 14) The more provocative pictures of Trasov suggest that a striptease has taken place out of the camera’s sight, as he stands wearing nothing but long black gloves and holding a whip with a cane-like handle that calls to mind his Mr. Peanut persona.

One image is a full-length view of Trasov, standing sideways in the centre of the photograph, gazing out at the viewer with an expression that is both coy and seductive. (Figure 15) The whip is wound around his lower body and he leans on the handle as if it were a cane, his shoulder slightly raised in a pose that could be variously interpreted as shyness, modesty, or invitation (perhaps all three). Trasov is an androgynous and erotic figure: his hair is fair and curly, his face is both boyish and pretty, and his body appears soft and yielding, his muscles barely defined. The similarities to homoerotic photography are inescapable, as are the references to classical and Renaissance statuary. Both his posture and his physical appearance are reminiscent of Donatello’s *David* (c. 1440), a sculpture often read as homoerotic due to the boy’s nudity, his effeminate pose, his slim androgynous body, and the careful placement of a feather from Goliath’s helmet that curves gracefully up the length of his leg and caresses his inner thigh.<sup>16</sup> (Figure 16)

A second and more revealing (both literally and figuratively) photo of Vincent Trasov submitted for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* shows him from the rear, sporting the gloves and holding the whip horizontally with both hands, pressing it against his exposed buttocks. (Figure 17) He looks over his shoulder, eyes downcast, his delicate facial features seen in profile. The vaguely sinister gloves and the suggestively placed whip with its cane-like handle are ambiguous signs that can be read both as accessories for Trasov's dandyish Mr. Peanut persona and as props to be used in sadomasochistic sexual role-play. The whip may be used to produce both pain and pleasure on the body (either Trasov's or that of an unseen partner). The emphasis on Trasov's buttocks in this photograph is, of course, significant, since "homosexuality" as a *sexual practice* (as opposed to a social identity) is typically associated – at least in the heterosexual imagination – with anal intercourse. Placed in such close proximity to the buttocks, the whip's handle reads as a phallic symbol, suggesting the possibility of penetration. The image is both seductive and unsettling, as it embodies sexual possibilities that are considered taboo by most of us (even today, in our age of supposed sexual "freedom") but are nevertheless desirable to many straights and queers alike, whether they admit it openly or not. The gay or queer male body is shown here as a site where boundaries (both physical and metaphorical) are deregulated, unstable, penetrable. In the construction of male heterosexual identity, the anus is always conceived as, quite literally, a *no-man's land* that must never be crossed, a boundary that cannot be breached for fear that penetration will result in the collapse of a stable male identity. In this photo for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, Trasov is a figure that is threatening to the dominant order's conceptions of normative gender and sexual identity – a beautiful, young, blond "boy" in a state of complete nakedness, brazenly offering up his body as an object of desire and a site for the acting out of polymorphously perverse desires.

In all likelihood, these images from *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* were not designed to



stand up to sustained scrutiny decades after they were made – on the contrary, they were documentation for what was essentially a hybrid of performance and correspondence-art, forms of art-making that are ephemeral, spontaneous and about “the moment.” At the time, they were probably treated as humorous, throw-away shots to circulate among the Eternal Network (through *FILE Magazine*) and the audience at the AGO awards ceremony (which included dignitaries, government bureaucrats and art gallery professionals).<sup>17</sup> However, when viewed today through the lens of queer theory, both the well-known image of Marcel Dot as *Miss General Idea* and the lesser-known photographs of Vincent Trasov acquire a complicated set of meanings far beyond their original context as art-world parody.

If we return to the definitions of Camp quoted earlier, both the definition in the dictionary of Victorian slang and the late-twentieth-century description of Camp in the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* focus equally on the importance of “[a]ctions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis.” The Victorian definition goes further and attributes an “exceptional want of character” to those who present themselves in a Camp manner. Well before the advent of contemporary gay identity politics, there was a recognition among those in “proper” bourgeois society that the Camp gesture signalled a challenge to bourgeois (as opposed to aristocratic and therefore, “foppish”)<sup>18</sup> notions of the Self as unique, abiding and natural, substituting instead a concept of the Self as “performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts.”<sup>19</sup> The Camp gesture was read in terms of both excess and lack: first, it was judged excessive according to the standards of acceptable and normal bourgeois male behaviour; second, this gestural excess was said to signify a lack of Self, lack of integrity, and thus exclusion from the social body (lack of membership).<sup>20</sup> Today, the Camp pose as signifier of queer identity is read in much the same way, as a sign of both excess (of artifice, of “femininity”) and lack (of substance, of authenticity, of “masculinity”), as well as

exclusion from the mainstream. The Camp posture is unsettling because of its insistence on the superficial, its refusal of depth: while its dramatic flair *gestures* toward meaning, it is in fact all surface, no interiority. As we have seen in the photographs of Vincent Trasov and Marcel Dot, Camp also disrupts dominant notions of desire and sexual identity by inscribing sexuality on the surface of the body, bringing it out of the private sphere and into the public realm. Camp signifying practices allow a subject to enact a queer sexual identity with nothing more than a gesture, a tone of voice, or an attitude. Both the image of Marcel Dot as *Miss General Idea* and the photos of Trasov posing in various states of undress embody Camp's insistence on the pose, the gesture that purports to carry meaning and yet insists on keeping everything on the surface.

Early on in their career, Canadian art critic John Bentley Mays recognized this insistence on General Idea's part to keep things on the surface. In a long series of "telegraphic observations" written for *Open Letter* in 1974 surveying the primary themes and myths in G.I.'s work, Mays expresses first his frustration, and then his resigned acceptance of General Idea's persistent pose of superficiality. He quotes from a letter to AA Bronson (which he may or may not have sent), in which he writes:

*dear a.a. bronson,*  
*i've decided never to try*  
*to interview anybody from*  
*general idea again as long*  
*as i live.*  
*you win.*

*"let's keep this on the surface."<sup>21</sup>*

In a letter to someone referred to as "freekie" – a letter which may or may not have been written after the letter to Bronson – Mays elaborates on his struggles to get at something deeper in his interactions with General Idea:

*i don't see any point in talking with the general ideas any more, except that i like a couple of them.*

*i don't think they want this article i've projected, or, in any case it doesn't seem to make any difference to them, not enough to feed in anything that i would like to know.*

*e.g.*

*i asked a.a. bronson what he was doing in 1967, hoping to get an idea of what the psychic time/space factors were back there in that annus mirabilis of the counter-cultural shift downstream, etc.*

*he told me he was at expo.*

*i'm dealing with those guys at the strictly artifactual level from now on.*<sup>22</sup>

By "dealing with those guys at the strictly artifactual level," John Bentley Mays was accommodating himself to General Idea's insistence on the primacy of the object ("the artifactual") over the subject, surface over depth. AA Bronson's inane and unforthcoming response to Mays' presumably probing questions about General Idea's involvement in the late-sixties counterculture is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's construction of a vacuous and superficial public persona, reflected in such ego-effacing Warholisms as: "The interviewer should just tell me the words he wants me to say and I'll repeat them after him. I'm so empty I can't think of anything to say." Kenneth E. Silver's observations on Andy Warhol offer a useful interpretation of Camp's affinity for the superficial: "I have come to think that Warhol's insistence on our taking his art at face value, his insistence that we remain on the surface of things, derived from acute awareness that 'depth,' intellectual or pictorial, could all too easily begin to assume the shape of 'the closet,' from the depths of which one might never reemerge."<sup>23</sup> In other words, the refusal of depth is a refusal to be pinned down, a rejection of the bourgeois model of identity in favour of a queer identity that is self-consciously performed through repetitive and stylized acts. It is also an assertion of freedom: freedom from the constraints of normative conceptions of gender, sexual identity and the Self; freedom from the old Modernist model of what an artist should be; and certainly, freedom from the closet. In its affinity for the superficial and its refusal

of depth, the public persona posited by General Idea (like Warhol before them) can be most productively compared to the figure of the drag queen.

It is widely acknowledged that the figures of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol loom especially large behind the artistic production of General Idea and the rest of the Eternal Network.<sup>24</sup> The particular aspects of Warhol's practice that most influenced the Network were his obsession with image, fame and celebrity; his interest in gender-bending, shape-shifting fictive identities, as reflected in the many drag-queens and "superstars" who came and went through the doors of his Factory; and his own swishy performance of an emptied-out persona (vacuous, superficial and queer) that took the Abstract Expressionist model of the artist as swaggering, tortured genius and turned it on its ear. Marcel Duchamp's example, as manifested in the figure of his female alter ego Rose Sélavy, was in the creation of personas, "the pursuit of the androgyne as a new creative type and formulating a dialectical critique of aesthetics through pun and allusion."<sup>25</sup> Described by some as one of Marcel Duchamp's most famous and influential creations, the artist's performance of the fictive feminine character of Rose Sélavy may have had little or nothing to do with questioning the boundaries of normative gender categories when it first occurred in 1920.<sup>26</sup> (Figure 18) Regardless, it was taken up as such by General Idea, their collaborators, and other queer artists in the late twentieth century who incorporated Rose Sélavy into their pastiche of artistic references.<sup>27</sup> Although Duchamp was (at least ostensibly) heterosexual, his dandyish persona and his "aristocratic disdain" for the "'splashy' side of painting" won him many gay and queer sympathizers – clearly he was not shy about pushing the boundaries of convention.<sup>28</sup>

General Idea present us with a vision of the artist as drag queen, not only in the literal sense of the individual who adopts the vestimentary codes of the opposite gender in order to perform that

gender in a spectacular way, but also in a richly layered metaphorical sense. Their artistic output is littered with images of drag queens, transsexuals, fetish queens, and others who deliberately subvert, invert and pervert prevailing notions of sex and gender. (Figure 19) Some examples that come readily to mind include: the well-known portrait of Marcel Dot posing as *Miss General Idea*; the found image (from a porn magazine) of a drag queen clothed in rubber fetish gear and stilettos, appropriated by G.I. as *The Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*; Pascale, the transsexual cabaret singer who performed at the awards ceremony for the 1971 pageant; the photo of Vincent Trasov, in his persona as the dandy Mr. Peanut, gracing the cover of the first issue of *FILE Magazine*; and finally, General Idea's photographic portraits of themselves as poodles. Let us first agree that these are all examples of drag, in the broadest sense of the term, because they all involve a subject adopting the vestimentary codes of an identity (woman, peanut, poodle) *not* assigned to them at birth and then performing that identity in a spectacular way.<sup>29</sup> The figure of the drag queen is a sign of radical instability and the fact that it appears more than once in General Idea's work is, to my mind, ample proof that it carries significant meaning in their body of work and therefore needs to be examined more closely. I believe that when the figure of the drag queen appears in General Idea's work, it is being used for its potential to expose, challenge and disrupt the categories that contain and regulate our bodies, what we do with them, and how they are represented.

The drag queen is a queer figure that disrupts the binary symmetry of male versus female, straight versus gay, hetero versus homo, by introducing a "third" term – not a "third sex," mind you, but a new mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility. This "third" is that which, in the words of Marjorie Garber, "questions binary thinking and introduces crisis." The crisis it introduces is a category crisis, "a failure of definitional distinction," a rupture in the borders that typically separate and contain genders and sexualities.<sup>30</sup> For General Idea, the

image of the drag queen clearly signals the permeability of those anxiously guarded boundaries (both physical and psychological) that are meant to separate queer from straight and male from female, but on a more general level, it also suggests the reconfiguration of existing cultural categories and the questioning and crossing of all boundaries. The presence of the drag queen challenges the very notion of stable or “natural” categories and opens up the doors to play, pleasure, ambiguity and the proliferation of signifiers with unstable signifieds. The drag queen foregrounds the construction and performance of a Self that is artificial as opposed to “natural,” decentred as opposed to coherent, fluid and improvisational as opposed to stable, and constituted by repetitive and stylized acts as opposed to determined by an abiding essence.

General Idea’s visual and textual work virtually demands that we draw the parallels between their carefully constructed and performed artistic personas and the performance of queer identity enacted by drag queens. In the “Glamour Issue” of *FILE Magazine*, General Idea state:

*The image of the artist is the easiest to inhabit. Because of its historic richness, its ready but empty mythology (berets, paint brushes, palettes, in a word FORM without content) the shell which was art was simple to invade. [...] Thus we became glamorous, made art, made ourselves over in the image of art.*<sup>31</sup>

Ten years later, in their 1985 video *Shut the Fuck Up*, AA Bronson and Felix Partz revisit the familiar terrain of drag as they wear neon poodle wigs and speak sardonically about how “there’s nothing that pleases the media more than an artist in artist’s drag.”<sup>32</sup> Both statements are ironic, they are clearly not meant to be accepted at face value but rather ask to be explored for their covert, or implied meaning. Neither declaration is really about how easy it is to fake it and make it in the art world by donning a beret and a paint palette – all three members of General Idea were university educated and trained as either artists or architects and there is no question that they struggled to achieve recognition and success in the art world (both in Canada and abroad). Only a very naïve reader could mistake General Idea’s pronouncements about inhabiting “the

image of the artist” or assuming “artist’s drag” as some kind of “How-to” guide on how to break into the art world. And yet, having said that, many a writer who covered General Idea’s work in the popular press throughout their twenty-five-year collaboration fell into the trap of taking General Idea at their word and repeating their statements about wanting to be “famous and glamorous artists” uncritically. Nevertheless, what is really at issue in the statements quoted above is the question of self-presentation. Specifically, General Idea are asserting that it is “easy” to present a Self cobbled together from a variety of materials – signifiers such as gestures, words, actions, attitudes and ornamentation – and it is easy to have others accept that Self you choose to present because, indeed, it is something that we *all* do on a daily basis. General Idea adopt the model of the drag queen for their performance of an artistic persona because the drag queen is the most visible exponent of an identity constituted from a series of repetitive and stylized acts. Moreover, the drag queen is a marginalized figure not only within the heterosexual mainstream but also within already marginal gay “communities” because they most visibly embody the gay stigma of effeminacy.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in identifying themselves with such a marginal figure, General Idea could hang on to a certain “outsider” status all the while showing their work in prestigious art institutions, benefiting from government grants, and so forth. However, I believe that ultimately, General Idea’s conscious choice to foreground the figure of the drag queen in their work is part of a larger strategy aimed at pointing to the masks we all wear, the poses we assume and the identities we perform even in our most banal moments, through gestures, speech acts and the manipulation of surfaces.

Critics are quick to recognize that *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* and all the artworks in various media that ensued in preparation for the fictional *1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* are allegories for the basic structures of art-making and the art world. Many critical and curatorial essays, reviews and articles in the popular press have assigned art world equivalents to the five

primary allegorical figures in the General Idea project – not a difficult task given that General Idea spelled it all out in a 1978 issue of *FILE* – and the results are invariably the same: General Idea symbolizes the artist in contemporary society; The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant represents the art world's star-making machinery; Miss General Idea 1984 is the artwork itself; The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion (sic) represents the museum and gallery system; and finally, the Frame of Reference signifies the audience of art, the mass media and the critical public.<sup>34</sup> However, as John Bentley Mays rightly points out in an essay written in 1984, neither General Idea's audiences nor the trio themselves would have remained interested in General Idea's work had they only and endlessly satirized the art world. The General Idea Project is still compelling to us, some thirty year after its inception, because it can be read on a number of levels. The trope of the beauty pageant and the system that surrounds it allowed General Idea to address both the specific and the general in our culture at the same time – as Mays wrote back in 1984, “over time, the project of General Idea begins to speak not merely of the art-world, but also of the world; or of both at the same time, in the manner of symbol.”<sup>35</sup>

At the most basic level, General Idea present us with a fictional narrative: the story of a collective corporate entity called General Idea that stages beauty pageants; crowns beauty queens; builds and then destroys a pavilion in which to stage its pageants; and finally, excavates the ruins of the pavilion to reconstruct its own history from archaeological fragments depicting the rites of an ancient and mysterious poodle cult. On a second level, which seems to be the level at which many critics begin and end their inquiry into this work, the General Idea project is an allegory, a satirical representation of the art world in the post-Warhol era. General Idea cast themselves in the role of the contemporary artist, the “bad boy” and darling of the art world; the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant is the hype surrounding the artist; the Search for the Spirit of Miss General Idea represents the artist's creative process; and Miss G.I. herself is the allegorical



embodiment of the work of art. In this allegory, the pageant pavilion is the museum and gallery system, a site for the presentation of art and spectacle. In this version of the General Idea story, the three men are coolly ironic artists, cultural critics with a pen in one hand, a paintbrush in the other and a martini glass nearby, having a laugh at the art world's favourite myths and pretensions – not wishing to destroy them, but merely to point out that these fictions exist. They drink a toast to the absurdity of the art critic and the myth of the artist as rebel, visionary and glamorous star, and then don those masks so that they may show how ridiculous it all is.

Beyond that reading lies another, more complex reading of the General Idea project as a microcosmic representation of the macrocosm of late-twentieth-century Western society. Of particular interest to me is the critique of social conventions around sex and gender that is articulated by General Idea through the vehicle of the beauty pageant. The Miss General Idea Pageant, as an overarching theme that structures the bulk of G.I.'s work from the early 1970s to the mid-'80s, acts as a site in which sexual and gender identities are complicated, called into question. Within the discourse on General Idea's work there has been no critical analysis of the format of the beauty pageant itself and little or no thoughtful consideration of why General Idea chose the beauty pageant, of all things, as *the* pop culture ritual they wanted to appropriate. To the extent that these questions are considered at all, the prevailing belief is that beauty pageants are about glamour, and as artists who professed an interest in glamour and popular culture, General Idea were naturally drawn to the format of the beauty pageant.<sup>36</sup>

The choice of the beauty pageant as a vehicle for cultural critique is one that must be deconstructed and examined more closely. The beauty pageant is no ordinary pop culture cliché: it is, in fact, a ritual for the performance of an idealized, heteronormative gender identity (the identity of "woman") which poses as frivolous, popular entertainment. With its emphasis on

physical beauty as a primary signifier of “femininity”, the beauty pageant reduces gender to a question of aesthetics, of the manipulation of surfaces. Thus, without intending to, beauty pageants actually reveal to what extent gender is constructed, to what extent it relies on appearances and the performance of repetitive and stylized acts.

Although not as popular as they once were, beauty pageants do important ideological work in mainstream society. At its core, the beauty pageant as social ritual is not about beauty (or, an even more ludicrous claim, promoting scholarship among women), it is in fact a showcase for the values, beliefs and behaviour that exist at the center of a group’s sense of itself.<sup>37</sup>

Specifically, the beauty pageant offers a platform for a group to promote and maintain its normative *ideals* of gender and sexual identity, morality, and regional, communal or national identity. Despite recent attempts to revamp the beauty pageant format in order to give the illusion of “political correctness”, there is no question that pageants are still in the business of promoting an idealized, normative conception of “femininity”, and more indirectly, “masculinity”.<sup>38</sup> The ideal of womanhood put on stage in beauty contests is closely associated with broader concepts such as morality and larger social entities such as the “nation”. In the United States in particular, the beauty pageant transcended its early-twentieth-century reputation as a spectacle lacking in morality and decorum and became, after the Second World War, positively patriotic and respectable.<sup>39</sup> In the postwar period, ideal beauty and “femininity” as embodied in the figure of the beauty queen became closely linked to morality, proper deportment and good citizenship. Beauty pageants became part of the culture of middle-class civic boosterism.

It is not difficult to see that the beauty pageant as a pop culture ritual does important ideological work in the dominant order, and yet this fact is rarely acknowledged (and certainly not

acknowledged in the writing on General Idea). To a large extent, the success and popularity of the beauty pageant relies on maintaining the illusion that it is nothing but a good, clean, wholesome diversion – nothing but entertainment. On its official website, the Miss America Organization acknowledges the role it plays in both shaping and reflecting hegemonic ideals, but it does so (rather incredibly) in the form of a boast, in a claim to respectability and social relevance:

*The story of the Miss America Organization is an essential chapter in the history of women in the twentieth century. Its national scope and longevity alone has had an effect on our nation's conception of womanhood, providing an important register of significant social and cultural trends in American society. Since its beginnings in 1921, it has reflected ideas about national identity, community, and moral standards, as well as beauty, femininity, and the roles of women.*<sup>40</sup>

Pageants act as a site where identities – both specific and general, individual and collective – are made public and visible. Through the literal and metaphorical figure of the woman, the beauty queen, these identities are made to appear coherent and natural, rather than fragmented and constructed. Because of our reproductive powers, women are held up as symbols of the continuation of a culture.

By publicly staging the performance of its values, goals and collective identity, a nation, locality or group also exposes these values and goals to interpretation and challenge. Beauty pageants thus provide the opportunity for ruptures in the seemingly coherent identity that is promoted through pageantry. Probably the most famous instance of a rupture occurring in the supposedly seamless construction of ideal womanhood in the Miss America Pageant is the case of Vanessa Williams. When Williams was crowned Miss America in 1984, much was made of the fact that she was the first African-American woman ever to win the title. The Miss America Organization could make claims about racial inclusivity, diverse ideals of beauty and so forth, regardless of the fact that Williams' beauty was in fact a very close approximation of the "White" ideal.

Things changed radically when it was revealed that Williams had not only posed nude for *Playboy*, but that some of the photographs depicted her in sexual positions with another *woman*. The image of Miss America as a model of morality, middle-class propriety and good citizenship was shattered by this revelation of “sexual impropriety” in Williams’ past, and she promptly lost the crown. In a felicitous coincidence, the first runner-up and subsequent Miss America that year was also African-American and thus the Miss America Organization could hold on to its claims of inclusivity. But there is no doubt that the Vanessa Williams scandal raised a number of questions about the ideal of womanhood constructed by beauty pageants and produced not one but at least *three* ruptures: first, her appearance in *Playboy* automatically cast her in the public imagination in the role of “fallen woman”, overtly sexualized and (it was presumed) promiscuous; second, the fact that she was African-American (and the first one crowned, no less) complicated matters, as the scandal brought up the most pernicious stereotypes that exist about black female sexuality; and finally, the fact that the *Playboy* images showed Williams’ with a woman raised the spectre of queerness in a context where it had never appeared before. The most gratifying aspect of this story is that, rather than sinking into obscurity and accepting the role of “fallen woman” that was thrust upon her when she lost her crown, Vanessa Williams re-invented herself as actress and singer and is today the only Miss America to have achieved the status of celebrity. Perhaps the true measure of her post-scandal success lies in the Miss America website itself, where she is now listed as one of two Miss Americas for 1984, her once-tarnished figure now recuperated and re-incorporated into the Miss America machinery because her success makes her impossible to ignore. (It should go without saying that the scandal is not mentioned in any “literature” produced by the Miss America Organization.)

This story, although seemingly unrelated to General Idea and the Miss General Idea Pageant, is used to illustrate the argument that, although beauty pageants pose as mere entertainment, they

are in fact involved in a very complicated and tenuous construction of identity that can be easily shattered, either from within (as was the case with Williams) or without. In North America, resistance to beauty pageants and contests is a long-standing practice. Particularly in the heyday of the Women's Liberation Movement, the critique of beauty pageants was seen as a principle means of articulating and grounding many American feminist principles and struggles. The most well-known protest, when those bras were burned outside the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, occurred in 1968 (just three years before G.I.'s pageant) and received national media attention. In a transparent attempt to co-opt the feminist critique of beauty pageants, the website of the Miss America Organization acknowledges the 1968 protest and others in the 1970s in an overview of the organization's history and boasts that "again, Miss America became the vehicle for America to re-negotiate its understanding of women's status in society."<sup>41</sup>

Today, large beauty pageants such as Miss America are dominated by major corporate sponsorship arrangements with close ties to media empires, thus ensuring that they not only promote the values of a nation or locality but also the interests of a corporate élite (which, nowadays, are virtually one and the same thing anyway). What we learn in examining the ideological assumptions and relations of power underpinning the glamorous spectacle of the beauty pageant is that this popular performance of gender has very little to do with entertainment and everything to do with culture and power, with the dominant order's attempts to promote and maintain its values and beliefs. Once we understand the beauty pageant as a ritual centered on the performance of gender and motivated by the dominant order's need to reinforce existing systems of power, it becomes clear why General Idea were drawn to its format as a vehicle for the critique of both the art world and society in general.

General Idea's use of the beauty pageant as metaphor for the production, distribution and

legitimation of art serves a dual function: by drawing parallels between the production of gender and the production of art, it manages to question both. Normative gender and sexual identities are exposed as social constructions, and the process of art production is demystified, reduced to the manipulation of images and the assumption of a persona (that of the artist-creator). Both art and gender are acknowledged to be the *effects* of processes of selection and stylization, the manipulation of surfaces, and the adoption of a certain subjectivity. General Idea posit that the artist, the beauty queen and the drag queen are all engaged in the construction of a persona, an identity based on appearance and performance.<sup>42</sup> Of course, what sets the beauty queen's performance of identity apart from that of the drag queen or General Idea is that while the latter two foreground their role-playing in an effort to undermine the dominant order, the beauty queen attempts to conceal her role-playing in order to maintain the ideals of the dominant order. But just as General Idea's tongue-in-cheek send-up of the artist in a post-Warhol age focuses on glamour, celebrity and style and the drag queen's performance of gender is a theatrical, extravagant contrivance drawing on a popular discourse of fame, beauty and luxury linked to the entertainment industry, so too the beauty queen's performance of ideal womanhood is a spectacular contrivance. By crowning a man – artist Michael Morris/Marcel Dot – as *Miss General Idea 1971-1983*, making him the de facto embodiment of the spirit of General Idea, General Idea make the equation explicit: beauty queen = drag queen = artist. Rejecting any claims to metaphysical depth, originality or authenticity, General Idea boldly claim a queer identity for themselves, an identity that foregrounds depthlessness, frivolity and artifice. In doing so they take to heart the epigram coined by Oscar Wilde: "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second is, no one has yet discovered."

---

<sup>1</sup> John Bentley Mays reflecting on the work of the Eternal Network. Mays, "Snakes in the Garden" 166.

<sup>2</sup> Moe Meyer states that Camp was a new word when it first appeared in a dictionary of Victorian slang in 1909. At the time, it was defined as follows: "Actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French.

Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character." Quoted in Moe Meyer, "Under the Sign of Wilde: An archaeology of posing," *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 75. Andrew Ross, meanwhile, writes that Camp is "obscurely" related to the French expression *se camper* (to posture or to flaunt), but with "a history of English upper-class usage." Ross 145.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kate Davy, "Fe/Male Impersonation: The discourse of Camp," *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 139.

<sup>4</sup> Ross 151. Italics in original text.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of the Dadaists and Surrealists, I am referring specifically to their experiments with illustrations, advertisements, clothing and window dressing. Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996) 37. As for the Situationists, I am referring to one of their most well-known strategies, *détournement*, which Guy Debord defined as "the re-use of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble." Debord argued that the power of *détournement* came from its doubled meaning, and from its practicality – it was easy to use and had an "inexhaustible potential for re-use." Guy Debord, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude," reprinted in *Post-Pop Art*, ed. Paul Taylor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) 7.

<sup>6</sup> The 1971 pageant began as a form of mail-art and culminated in a form of Performance Art with the wards ceremony at the AGO. The pageant entry kit was sent to sixteen pre-selected "finalists" (artists from across Canada) by mail. The kit contained a variety of G.I. ephemera, but the key items were: a liver-coloured taffeta dress from the 1940s (G.I. bought sixteen of these dresses from a women's clothing store that went out of business in the '60s), christened *The Miss General Idea Gown*; a black-and-white photo of a drag queen in fetish gear, dubbed *The Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*; a letter of invitation signed by Granada Gazelle, Miss General Idea 1969, and a black-and-white photo of Miss Honey (Miss G.I. 1970) wearing what looks like a ceramic mask with painted lips. Participants were asked to submit at least eight photographs of themselves (or a stand-in) modelling *The Miss General Idea Gown*. Of the sixteen entry kits sent, thirteen garnered a response. General Idea reviewed the photographic submissions and made selections for enlargements. These were presented as *The 1971 Miss General Idea Documentation* (1971), along with the silkscreen on brown latex rubber print titled *The Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*, at A Space in September of 1971. The three judges, two of which were selected by General Idea to represent the Canadian art scene's important players, were: actor Daniel Freedman (dubbed "General Idea's Glamour Consultant"), influential art consultant Dorothy Cameron, and David Silcox, former visual arts officer of the Canada Council, who was then Dean of Fine Arts at York University. The elaborate Grand

Awards Ceremony was held at the Art Gallery of Ontario on October 1, 1971. This description of *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* is drawn from Bayer, "Uncovering" 65, 67, 72.

<sup>7</sup> Bayer, "Uncovering" 72.

<sup>8</sup> Bayer, "Uncovering" 74.

<sup>9</sup> General Idea, "Borderline Cases," reprinted in *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective* (Toronto: Vancouver Art Gallery and Art Official Inc., 1984) 50. In this article, originally published in the September 1973 issue of *FILE*, General Idea repeatedly state: "Ambiguity is not a symptom of a schizophrenic who travels back and forth across the line but a quality of the border dweller."

<sup>10</sup> Newton 49.

<sup>11</sup> The *Hand of the Spirit* is one of several found objects that function as essential props in the role-playing of General Idea and their collaborators. Legend has it that West Coast artist Vincent Trasov found the original *Hand of the Spirit* in the trash bin of a jewelry store on Toronto's Yonge Street. Originally a display prop for the commodity fetish – a diamond ring perhaps – the plexiglass hand is re-circulated within the Eternal Network as a different kind of fetish icon. The hand is stylized, fashioned into a gesture that Scott Watson describes as "campy and precious, signalling glamour and artificiality while claiming an other-worldly spiritual presence." Watson 16. It is a gesture of display, presenting the subject as object, as a product of culture rather than nature. Several versions of the hand were made, including one in which it was attached to a long plexiglass handle that transformed it into a kind of magic wand that infused everything it touched with the spirit of the artists' network. Bayer, "Uncovering" 98.

<sup>12</sup> Writer Michael Moon argues that "unsanitized drag," as he calls it, "infuriates many people" and shows "that it is not wearing a wig or skirt or heels that is the primary sign of male drag performance, but rather a way of inhabiting the body with defiant effeminacy; or, the effeminate body itself." Michael Moon, "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion," reprinted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 220.

<sup>13</sup> Butler 270.

<sup>14</sup> In his guise as Mr. Peanut, Vincent Trasov was the cover model for the first issue of *FILE* ever published, in April 1972. The perfect dandy, Mr. Peanut posed confidently against the backdrop of the Toronto cityscape, top hat and cane in hand and spats perfectly polished. In the figure of Mr. Peanut, we see once again the image of the dandy that recurs in the work of General Idea and their collaborators as a reference to a queer, avant-garde artistic lineage.

<sup>15</sup> The photographs of Vincent Trasov were taken by Michael Morris/Marcel Dot. The recent catalogue for the Art



Gallery of Ontario's retrospective exhibition of G.I.'s early work – *General Idea 1968-1975: The Search for the Spirit* – includes photos of seven of the thirteen pageant “finalists” modelling *The Miss General Idea Gown*. The picture of Trasov reproduced in the catalogue shows him fully clothed, wearing the dress and a shawl. The more homoerotic images of him in g-string and gloves, holding a cane, are not shown.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1994) 5.

<sup>17</sup> I would think that there was also an element of *épater les bourgeois* at play in the racier shots of Vincent Trasov.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas A. King has argued that the English aristocracy was in “crisis” during the early modern period and that “the continued promulgation of aristocratic legitimacy through spectacular self-display and conspicuous consumption” was interpreted by the bourgeoisie as “empty gesturing, mere appearance with no underlying being.” He adds: “The aristocratic adoption of a studied casualness as a way of marking their difference from the social body was reread by bourgeois critics as a kind of *perversion*, a disjunction of the self and the social body.” Thomas A. King, “Performing ‘Akimbo’: Queer pride and epistemological prejudice,” *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994) 24, 26. Italics added.

<sup>19</sup> Meyer, “Under the Sign” 75.

<sup>20</sup> Meyer, “Under the Sign” 76.

<sup>21</sup> John Bentley Mays, “General Idea,” *Open Letter*, ed. Frank Davey, Second Series, No.8 (Summer 1974): 14.

<sup>22</sup> Mays, “General Idea” 15.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth E. Silver, “Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art,” *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992) 200.

<sup>24</sup> Watson 10.

<sup>25</sup> Watson 10.

<sup>26</sup> Rose Sélavy (a verbal pun on ‘*Eros c’est la vie*’ [Eros is life]) was the product of a collaboration between Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp in 1920. The two artists collaborated in the making of a fictional product called *Belle Haleine/Eau de Voilette* (Beautiful Breath/Veil Water), that included a photograph of Duchamp, dressed as a woman, on a perfume bottle. (*Belle Haleine* was also a pun on *belle Hélène* – of Troy – perhaps an ironic allusion to the disproportionate amount of importance that has always been placed on female beauty.) This Dada gesture was both a playful send-up of the cosmetics/hygiene industry and, as David Hopkins explains, “a succinct formulation of

Duchamp's understanding of art as (feminized) consumption as opposed to (masculinized) production, as later exemplified by the *Boîte-en-Valise*." David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945 – 2000* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000)

54. *Belle Haleine/Eau de Voilette* was reproduced a year later on the cover of the only issue of *New York DADA*. In 1923, Man Ray and Duchamp conspired in a photographic re-creation of Rose Sélavy. Never appearing in public, Sélavy was understood as a symbolic celebration of artistic freedom. Maia-Mari Sutnik, *A Practical Dreamer: The Photographs of Man Ray* (Toronto: AGO, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Marjorie Garber points out that this image of the artist as drag queen was also taken up by both Robert Mapplethorpe in his *Self Portrait* of 1980 in which he is made-up to look like a woman and Andy Warhol in *Altered Image*, the famous portrait of the artist in drag by Chris Makos. Garber adds that the portrait of Warhol, "in a blond wig, makeup, jeans, and a necktie, his hands coyly hiding his crotch, is in fact Warhol dressed in homage to Rose Sélavy." Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 161.

<sup>28</sup> Hopkins 54-55.

<sup>29</sup> What distinguishes the cross-dresser (or transvestite) from the drag queen are the elements of performance and spectacle: the drag queen's inversion of gender categories is over-the-top, spectacular, and meant to be performed before an audience; the cross-dresser, on the other hand, adopts the vestimentary codes of the opposite gender for private and personal pleasure.

<sup>30</sup> Garber 11, 16.

<sup>31</sup> General Idea, "Glamour" 88.

<sup>32</sup> General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up* (produced for "Talking Back to the Media" symposium, Amsterdam), video, colour, sound, 14 minutes, 1985.

<sup>33</sup> In her study of drag queens in the early 1970s, Esther Newton argued that gay men were dogged by the stigma of effeminacy – referred to as "the stereotype" – and that "the persons who most visibly and flagrantly embody the stigma" are drag queens, because they are men who dress and act "like women." She states: "Professional drag queens are, therefore, professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world." Newton 2, 3. At the same time, as Marjorie Garber has pointed out, drag queens are outside the "gay world," they occupy a third space beyond both straight and gay.

<sup>34</sup> The following are examples. Mays, "Must We Burn" 12. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, "Culture Criminals: This Is the Frame of Reference," *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective* (Toronto and Vancouver:

Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984) v. General Idea, "Three Heads Are Better..." reprinted in *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective* (Toronto: Vancouver Art Gallery and Art Official Inc., 1984) 104-105.

<sup>35</sup> Mays, "Must We Burn" 12.

<sup>36</sup> Bayer, "The Search" 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> The official website of The Miss America Organization boasts that the organization is "the single largest provider of scholarship assistance to women in the world, with nearly \$35 million made available in 1999 alone" and it claims that it is "committed to instilling a spirit of community service and scholarship in young women across the nation through a variety of community-based programs." The Miss America Organization, "News & Events," *The Official Site of The Miss America Organization*, 2000 <<http://www.missamerica.org/press/press000914.html>>.

<sup>38</sup> As an example of the Miss America Organization's attempts to update its image for the "new millennium", I quote from their on-line press release for the pageant held on October 14, 2000: "For the first time ever, the Top 10 finalists won't parade, one-by-one, in a swimsuit before the judges – instead, they will be featured along with the other 41 contestants in their swimwear during a fast-paced production number reminiscent of the annual event's *beachside history*. [...] As usual, Miss America contestants can wear swimsuits in the styles [...] of their own choosing – basically any style that is not a string bikini or thong. And no, *contestants do not have to wear high heels ... footwear is still optional*." The Miss America Organization, "News & Events". Italics added.

<sup>39</sup> The Miss America Organization, "History of The Miss America Organization: the 1920s," *The Official Site of The Miss America Organization*, 2000 <<http://www.missamerica.org/history/20main.html>>. I suspect that there was a correlation between the postwar effort to herd women out of the work force and back into the domestic sphere after the men returned home from the war and the rise to prominence and respectability of The Miss America Pageant.

<sup>40</sup> The Miss America Organization, "History of The Miss America Organization," *The Official Site of The Miss America Organization*, 2000 <<http://www.missamerica.org/history/historymain.html>>.

<sup>41</sup> The Miss America Organization, "History of The Miss America Organization: the 1960s," *The Official Site of The Miss America Organization*, 2000 <<http://www.missamerica.org/history/60main.html>>.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, the mainstream ritual of beauty pageants has its equivalent in the "subcultural" queer ritual of drag balls, which are basically formal beauty contests for drag queens. General Idea and others in their circle would have undoubtedly been familiar with the practice of drag balls at the time that they came up with the concept of *Miss General Idea*, and they probably took great pleasure in having this added, covertly queer dimension to their mock

---

beauty pageant.

***Part 3: "Behold the poodle, banal and effete ..."***

Following the elaborate staging of *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, General Idea announced that, rather than make the pageant an annual event, they would focus their energies on one spectacular pageant to be held in 1984. In the interim, any performances that elaborated on the myth of Miss General Idea would be conceived of as rehearsals for *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant*. It was also planned that Marcel Dot, who had changed his name to Marcel Idea to mark the occasion of his crowning as *Miss General Idea 1971-1983*, would pass on his "crown" to *Miss General Idea 1984* at the big event. By introducing the idea of a pageant set thirteen years in the future into their narrative, General Idea gave themselves the freedom to explore and elaborate upon their nascent self-constructed mythology. Projecting towards the year 1984 also introduced a non-linear, fluid conception of time into a body of work that was already playing with fluid identities. As Jorge Zontal recounted later in an interview with Toronto's "magazine for lesbian/gay liberation," *The Body Politic*: "We just like to fuck around with time. We would like to keep time fluid and gelatinous, like a bowl of jelly – not too firm. 1984 never really meant a year – only on the most banal, narrative, literary level."<sup>1</sup> On that most banal and literary level, however, the year 1984 with its obvious reference to the novel by George Orwell, lent an air of authoritarianism to the whole Miss General Idea enterprise which the group quite liked.

What followed from 1974 to 1978 were a series of performance-based events, billed as rehearsals for *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant*, staged in cities across Canada. They included: *Blocking* (1974), performed at The Western Front, Vancouver; *Going thru the Motions* (1975), held in Toronto at the AGO; *Fleshed Out* (1977), at St. Lawrence College, Kingston; *Hot Property* (1977), staged at the Winnipeg Art Gallery; and finally, *Towards an Audience Vocabulary* (1978), at the Fifth Network/Cinquième Réseau, Toronto. These various rehearsals

included public run-throughs of key sequences in the pageant format: the welcoming speech; the farewell address by the previous year's queen; the parade of contestants; musical interludes; the "May I have the envelope please" segment; and the judges' decisions.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, these events also introduced the element of audience-participation or audience performance, training audiences in a variety of carefully circumscribed behaviours (repetitive and stylized acts) such as entering and exiting, standing and sitting, sleeping, booing, laughing and giving standing ovations. (Figure 20) In 1977, rehearsals even included a fire drill, in which the audience performed the act of fleeing from a burning building.<sup>3</sup>

In 1973 General Idea initiated plans for the "construction" of the fictive *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. Originally, the trio conceived of the *1984 Pavillion* as a collective creation, composed of submissions of hundreds of artists' proposals and blueprints collected through the correspondence-art network. However, response to their request in *FILE Magazine* for design proposals was underwhelming – likely a reflection of the fact that the mail-art phenomenon had begun to fade and the scene's major players were quitting the game – so General Idea shifted strategies and opted instead to formulate their own pseudo-architectural plans for the *Pavillion*. *Portrait of General Idea*, 1974, by Rodney Werden shows the three men assuming their new personas as visionary architects, posing around a drafting table surrounded by such accessories as graph paper, drafting tools, binoculars, a version of the *Hand of the Spirit* and a design for *The 1984 Spirit of Miss General Idea Vehicle* (designed in 1973).<sup>4</sup> (Figure 9) The first such group portrait of the trio (to my knowledge), this photograph reflects General Idea's changing context around the mid-seventies: as the mail-art phenomenon faded, so too the activity among the Eternal Network slowed down; the countercultural ideals of the sixties lost their currency and a once thriving "transcanada" art scene committed to spontaneous, collaborative art-making dispersed and disappeared from view;<sup>5</sup> and General Idea moved out of their Headquarters on 87

Yonge Street and into rented quarters at 241 Yonge Street, losing their crowd of hangers-on with the change of location. By the mid-1970s General Idea could no longer be described as a large, amorphous entity, consisting of a multitude of collaborators, friends and scenesters with AA, Felix and Jorge as the leaders. Though they remained actively committed to the idea of collectivity, General Idea became a trio and the idea of the “threesome” became a recurring theme both in their own work and in the critical writing on their artistic practice.<sup>6</sup>

The late 1970s saw a general shift in the art world away from institutional critique and the dematerialization of the art object, towards the *rematerialization* of the art object displayed within the four walls of the art institution. This period also saw General Idea exploring a less Conceptual, more object-based practice that brought them into gallery and museum spaces in a way hitherto unseen for the group.<sup>7</sup> The shift in strategy began in 1977 when General Idea committed an act of metaphorical/cultural arson, torching their mythical work in progress, *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, and setting the so-called “Spirit of Miss General Idea” free. Reinforcing their commitment to blurring the lines between fact and fiction, the real and the imagined, General Idea staged the burning of their mythical *Pavillion* as a public performance in Kingston, Ontario (*The Ruins of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1977). It was a full-scale outdoor event, complete with fire engines, smoke-bombs marking the ziggurat-shaped outline of the *Pavillion*, and a newscast helicopter flying overhead.<sup>8</sup> (Figure 21)

The fire served as the catalyst for the next phase of General Idea’s career, in which they took on the guise of archaeologists excavating the ruins of their self-created, self-destroyed world.

Rummaging through the “remains” of the *1984 Pavillion* for their 1978 exhibition *Reconstructing Futures*, General Idea uncovered fragments from both their “actual” past and “fictional” past, offering a useful summary of where they had been up to that point and a glimpse

of where they might go in the future. The exhibition consisted of two hundred of General Idea's showcards (basically illustrated index cards developed to identify themes and codify beliefs in G.I.'s work and document works-in-progress); a 29-minute video called *Pilot* summarizing several of the group's earlier performances and projects; and an installation documenting the fictive construction and destruction of the *1984 Pavillion* through enlarged aerial photographs of the site and a staged photo of the dramatic moment when AA, Felix and Jorge had to flee the burning building. (Figure 22) This mass of documentation in a variety of media served the primary purpose of recovering and reviewing the group's earlier work in an effort to close that chapter – to do away with their immediate past/future and trade it in for a new past and future, to be unearthed over time from the ruins of the *Pavillion*. By this point in General Idea's career, any sense of linear time and the teleological progression of history had been abandoned and replaced by a fluid, circuitous conception of time in which a future that never existed could be destroyed, reconfigured as a mythical past, and then reconstructed once again.

Notions of history came to the forefront in General Idea's work in 1978 for a variety of reasons. Although General Idea actually formed in 1969, the group maintained the fiction that they had formed a year earlier and celebrated their tenth anniversary in 1978, marking the occasion with a special issue of *FILE* and a party at the top of the CN Tower. 1978 also marked G.I.'s emergence onto the international art circuit, with *Reconstructing Futures* being shown at Canada House in London, England and the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris and the group being picked up by a private art gallery in Naples. It was during a visit to Naples that year that General Idea went to visit the ancient ruins of Pompeii. The first direct references to Pompeii appeared in G.I.'s work three years later in an outdoor installation on the corner of King and Bathurst in Toronto. Titled *Toronto's Fault: The First Tremors (The Ruins of the Silver Bar from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion)* (1981), the installation at the site of a building slated for



demolition was hailed by John Bentley Mays in the *Globe and Mail* as “the most complex, perfect matching of work to site, fiction to fact, myth to reality, history to nature since Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty.”<sup>9</sup> (Figure 23) At the level of narrative, the work functions as another element to be added to the General Idea mythology: presenting the excavated ruins of a room (specifically, the Silver Bar) from the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, it appears to draw a humorous correlation between the destruction of the ancient Roman resort and the destruction of General Idea’s self-constructed world. On a less literal level, however, the installation functions as a metaphor for excavations of a different sort: the unearthing of repressed desires, behaviours and identities, the emergence of that which has been forcibly suppressed in the subconscious or relegated to the margins. Eschewing (as always) an overtly political message, General Idea chose a more poetic and evocative way to comment on the repressive social climate of society in general and Toronto in particular, where conservative sexual politics were making their presence felt in police raids of gay bathhouses and government censorship of the arts.<sup>10</sup> At the time of the installation, John Bentley Mays wrote: “the work should also be seen as a prophetic herald of what could happen to the myth of Toronto the Trendy, a fiction that could be demolished this summer along with the building at King and Bathurst.”<sup>11</sup> Introduced into a real urban landscape and a tense social climate, this metaphorical tableau of a glamorous, silver-painted cocktail lounge (the site of pleasure) reduced to rubble by an earthquake (unseen forces, authoritarian regimes) resonated on a number of levels.

Following the outdoor installation of the ruins of the Silver Bar, General Idea focused on the idea of excavation as a metaphor for the unearthing of that which is typically repressed or marginalized. This was an area of investigation that echoed their earlier explorations of processes of masking and unmasking in the construction of identity. It is through the metaphor of excavation that poodles entered General Idea’s iconography. As General Idea sifted through

the ruins of the *1984 Pavillion* and exhibited their discoveries in galleries and museums the world over, what emerged was a fragmented portrait of an ancient, mysterious and decadent poodle cult. It is at this moment in General Idea's artistic career that we can most clearly identify a conscious shift in strategies of representation, with the enactment of queer identity now occurring less through the performative practices of Camp and more through the object-based practices of Camp – less through repetitive and stylized acts and more through the appropriation and redesignation of discarded cultural materials. In this, the second phase of their artistic collaboration – and the final one to be considered in this thesis – General Idea still engaged in the self-conscious construction and performance of queer identity, but I would say that it was now mediated through the surfaces of objects rather than the surfaces of the body.

From 1981 to 1984, the group uncovered and displayed architectural fragments from previously unknown areas and rooms of the *Pavillion*, most notably *The Room of the Unknown Function*. *The Room of the Unknown Function* was said to be located in the *Villa dei Misteri* of the *Pavillion*, thus making General Idea's allusions to the ruins of Pompeii explicit. The contents of the strange and famous mural in the real Villa dei Misteri (Villa of Mysteries) unearthed at Pompeii, bear review given how closely they are mirrored in the poodle frescoes. The original villa is decorated with a series of frescoes thought to depict initiation rites aimed at preparing privileged and protected girls for the psychological transition to life as married women.<sup>12</sup> At the centre of the frescoes is the figure of Dionysus, god of wine, who was worshipped in Classical times with orgiastic and ecstatic rites. Because the frescoes are thought to trace a young initiate's transition from childhood to womanhood, the themes of death and transfiguration – in the sense of the death of childhood and innocence – prevail. In one scene of the narrative, the initiate is shown reaching for a covered object, believed to be a phallus – not surprisingly, phallic symbols dominate in the architectural fragments from the *General Idea Pavillion*. The evocative

climax of the rites depicted in the Roman villa shows a scene of torture and transfiguration, in which the semi-nude initiate is whipped while another nude woman crashes celebratory cymbals. At the end of the ritual drama, the transformed initiate is shown preparing herself for marriage.<sup>13</sup> In their poodle frescoes, General Idea draw upon the psycho-sexual drama, mystery and decadence of the Villa dei Misteri to once again signal queerness in an unexpected context – here it is the context of historical record.

In *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia: A Mural Fragment from the Room with the Unknown Function in the Villa dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1982), the participants in the Dionysian initiation rites are transformed into a trio of highly stylized, quasi-human poodles, who stand on two feet and are capable of wielding whips and uncovering cornucopias with their dainty hands. (Figure 4) At the top of the mural, a border decorated with a ziggurat design calls to mind the architectural plans for the *1984 Pavillion*, while the band running along the bottom of the mural depicts small skulls, alluding perhaps to the same themes of loss of innocence and transfiguration represented in the original mural. The action in General Idea's mural "fragment" is almost a direct translation of a scene from the Pompeiian mural. In the original, a winged divinity stands prepared to strike with a whip, her hand raised as if warding off something the viewer cannot see. In G.I.'s mural, the central figure is a black poodle with what appear to be stylized gold wings – it stands upright, whip raised over its head. The initiate reaching for the covered object has been transformed into a pink poodle unveiling a phallic cornucopia. Finally, a female figure who holds a plate with what appear to be pine needles in the original is replaced by a blue poodle holding a tray with two martini glasses. A third martini glass is shown falling to the ground, spilling its contents. All three anthropomorphic poodles have stylized hands that bear an uncanny resemblance to the *Hand of the Spirit*, recalling the heady days of the Eternal Network. The sense of mystery and sinister sexual content in the

original mural is carried over into General Idea's mural fragment. Ultimately, I would argue that what the reconfigured mural depicts is far less important than what it suggests: danger, decadence, elaborate role-playing, social interactions based on pleasure and the performance of sexual rites, and the emergence of things once hidden. Perhaps the *Room with the Unknown Function* is an ancient incarnation of the *Ruins of the Silver Bar* – an allegorical reference to the gay bar scene, which in the early '80s would have been poised on the brink of the dark days of the AIDS epidemic. We could read the unveiling of the phallic cornucopia as a metaphor for the unveiling of queer male sexuality, or the presence of the *Hand of the Spirit* and the martini glasses as symbols of General Idea's hedonistic past, now being recuperated as fundamental elements of their mythology. In keeping with the spirit of the original Roman mural, General Idea's mural fragment reads like a clue to a barely understood mystery (the mystery of sexual desire? sexual identity?), posing questions but offering no definitive answers.

At the level of art-making strategies, the poodle frescoes appear to be General Idea's response to the rise of "New Figuration" in the early 1980s and the renewed interest in expressive, densely figurative painting in both Europe and North America. But, as critics have pointed out, General Idea's response to the art world's love affair with painting is deeply ironic: as the art object "rematerialized", General Idea's mythology self-destructed and their work was left in ruins; as artists returned to expressionist painting, often dealing with themes of alienation and angst, G.I. chose as their signature device the most affected, pretentious and ridiculous animal possible, the poodle; and as the art world became preoccupied with the status, value and integrity of precious objects, G.I. began exhibiting cheap fake relics made of plaster, plastic and wire mesh and fragments of fake frescoes on plywood and plasterboard.<sup>14</sup> Mounted on large expanses of tacky, squared-off composition board, General Idea's murals point to their status as fakes, as that-which-is-not-what-it-pretends-to-be. Likewise, the anthropomorphic trio of poodles signal

artifice. But the dogs do something more, they also point to General Idea's persistent preoccupation with the clichés of gay male sexuality.

The only issue of *FILE Magazine* to be published in 1983 was a special issue titled "Mondo Cane Kama Sutra" featuring AA, Felix and Jorge on the cover in poodle drag, posing as their poodle alter egos in floppy-eared fur hats and heavy make-up. (Figure 24) The magazine outlines the role of the poodle in General Idea's iconography in an article that reads in part:

*We are the poodle, banal and effete; note our relished role as watchdog, retriever and gay companion; our wit, pampered presence and ornamental physique; our eagerness for affection and affectation; our delicious desire to be groomed and preened for public appearances; in a word, our desire to please; those that live to please must please to live.*<sup>15</sup>

Almost always shown in threesomes, the poodles became General Idea's alter egos, mascots and signature device throughout much of the 1980s, popping up in paintings, installations, videos and *FILE Magazine*. Like the beauty queen and the drag queen before it, the figure of the poodle is taken up by General Idea as a signifier of the triumph of "culture" over "nature" – an "ornamental physique" on an otherwise ordinary dog becomes the epitome of artifice.<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting on General Idea's description of the poodle as "gay companion," AA Bronson explained in an interview with *The Body Politic*: "The poodle is obviously, in a way, the fag hairdresser's dog. It's also that of the prostitute or the lady of leisure or the little old lady with the grey hair or the Florida matron. So many visual clichés are bound up with that particular dog, but one of them is definitely a gay cliché."<sup>17</sup> In the poodle paintings of the early '80s, the animals are sexualized, most often seen in tandem with a phallic cornucopia or posing in various sexual positions. Their queerness lies in the combination of this sexual content and the implicit understanding that the trio of dogs represents the three members of General Idea.

The critical wit of the poodles functions on a number of levels. In the *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* series of paintings from 1984, General Idea's canine alter egos demonstrate a variety of sophisticated sexual positions (mimicking the contents of the original *Kama Sutra*), performing what one critic calls "a perversely humorous allegory of the collaborative dynamic of artmaking."<sup>18</sup> In this series of ten canvases, General Idea's work as a creative unit becomes, quite literally, a labour of love, an artistic *ménage à trois*. By linking art-making to love-making, General Idea suggest that their sexual identities play a central role in their artistic practice and vice versa. Once again, the spectre of "gay sex" that has always haunted the margins of the critical discourse on G.I is raised: looking at the three poodles in their "mechano-balletic" union and understanding the animals as pictorial proxies for General Idea, the viewer is left to speculate on the exact nature of AA, Felix and Jorge's "union". Even if we do not make the link between the three men of General Idea and the three poodles, queer sexuality is nevertheless implied in the paintings: each of the three poodles is a mirror image of the other two, which is to say that in their sexual coupling (or tripling), they do it with the Self rather than the Other. In psychoanalytic discourse, homosexuality is often described as a form of narcissism, a desire for the Self and a rejection of the Other. Engaged in their cold, mechanical *ménage à trois*, the poodles take up this stereotype of the "homosexual" as narcissist and throw it in the face of the viewer.

In the interview with General Idea published in *The Body Politic* in 1985, the writer assesses the queerness of these paintings succinctly, stating: "It's hard to imagine straight artists coming up with something like *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*."<sup>19</sup> In their response, General Idea are careful to draw a distinction between an understanding of queerness as rooted in sexual practice and a broader understanding (which they clearly favour) of queerness as rooted in *signifying* practices. It is the difference between seeing queerness merely as the antithesis of the heterosexual and

seeing it as the antithesis of the *norm*. AA Bronson argues: "I think the fact that we're not afraid to be playful works against the traditional male role. You know, the willingness to be silly at times, and without feeling that silliness was *meaningless*. That's something that I think was very difficult for the art world to accept when we first started out."<sup>20</sup> The poodle threesome, like all of General Idea's collective personas, is a playful subversion of the popular myth of the artist as individual genius. The singular artistic vision, so central to the culturally conservative art scene of the early '80s, is countered by General Idea's collaborative effort, and the still dominant masculinist construction of the artist (seen in the figures of, for example, Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente) is displaced by a trio of sexualized but aloof poodles, praised for their "pampered presence and ornamental physique."<sup>21</sup> In alluding to the poodle's "delicious desire to be groomed and preened for public appearances" and its "desire to please," General Idea are poking fun at the contemporary art system and the extent to which artists must endear themselves and their work to curators, critics and dealers in order to succeed. However, that aspect of the poodle conceit in G.I.'s work is (pardon the pun) lacking in bite. Given that, by the early 1980s, General Idea were themselves enjoying the role of darlings of the art establishment in earnest (with major exhibitions and retrospectives in galleries and museums around the world), any attempt on their part to appear critical of that aspect of the contemporary art system rings hollow. The poodle imagery is at its most interesting when it is read as General Idea's solution to the problem of how to be players in the early '80s art scene – with its return to object-based art, painterly gestures, and figuration – while still performing and circulating their queer identities.

The use of the poodle as a signature device in General Idea's work is typical of Camp's retrieval and recuperation of objects and discourses that have lost their lustre due to neglect and disdain. Throughout their career, General Idea recycled images and practices with a studied insouciance that eschewed any notion of originality, authenticity or authorship. They took up the detritus of

popular culture – the debased, the kitsch and the vulgar – and deployed it in new ways. The poodle iconography stands as the paradigmatic example of how General Idea seized upon the mutually appropriative and *productive* relations of “high” and “mass” culture that became firmly entrenched in the post-Pop era and used them to simultaneously elevate and undermine both art and pop culture. With the figure of the poodle, General Idea took “bad taste” and elevated it to the status of historical record (the poodle frescoes and relics), art (the canvases) and nobility (the late ‘80s mock-heraldic crests). In its function as gay cliché the figure of the poodle was also a way for G.I. to re-inscribe what they felt to be their differential status within the dominant order.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Vereschagin, “What’s the Big Idea?” *The Body Politic* June 1985: 31.

<sup>2</sup> Bayer, “Uncovering” 75.

<sup>3</sup> Bayer, “Uncovering” 75.

<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1970s, Toronto artist Rodney Werden created striking portraits of writers and artists (including General Idea and Dr. Brute, the fictive persona of Eric Metcalfe) acting out for the camera “the roles in which they found themselves, or would like to find themselves one day.” Throughout the 1970s, Werden performed a series of photographic and videotaped investigations of sexual extremity, acted out by subjects who sought to escape the stifling confines of urban mass culture. Mays, “Snakes in the Garden” 175, 179.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Watson argues that Mr. Peanut’s (Vincent Trasov) campaign for mayor of Vancouver in 1974 “marks the end of the effort to produce an active, collective, collaborating, avant-garde community.” Watson 19. Because the Eternal Network was a “transcanada” phenomenon with Vancouver and Toronto as its key sites, the slow fade of avant-gardist communal activity on the West Coast was reflected in Toronto.

<sup>6</sup> In a survey of General Idea’s history, Fern Bayer writes: “In the beginning, however, G.I. was less a troika, a three-man collective, and more a fluid, amorphous cultural “happening,” in the parlance of the 1960s. The boys were always the ringleaders of the group, but in the early years there was a veritable army of collaborators and fellow travellers (in the tradition of Andy Warhol’s Factory in Manhattan).” Bayer, “The Search” 11. It is important to note, however, that General Idea remained committed to the idea of collaborative networks and artist-run enterprises throughout their career: from 1972 to 1989, they designed, edited and published their own magazine, *FILE Magazine*, which functioned as both a networking tool for artists and a showcase for the diversity of artistic activity in Canada and elsewhere; and in 1974 they established Art Metropole in the front part of their new studio on 241



Yonge as an artist-run centre devoted to the distribution of artworks outside of the museum and gallery system (the focus of Art Metropole was and remains artists' books, videos, multiples and other ephemera).

<sup>7</sup> From 1971 to 1976, General Idea averaged one solo exhibition and/or project per year (with the exception of 1972 and 1973, when they had two solo shows per year). From 1977 onwards, the number of solo exhibitions and projects increased dramatically, with six solo shows in 1977 alone.

<sup>8</sup> Bayer, "Uncovering" 114.

<sup>9</sup> John Bentley Mays, "Old building's last salute an artful bang," *Globe and Mail* 11 July 1981. The outdoor installation was one part of a larger group project financed by A Space, called the Terminal Building Project.

<sup>10</sup> Mays, "Old building's last salute." Paul Trollope, "Toronto cops raid gay bath, charge 28 men," *The Body Politic* Feb. 1979: 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Mays, "Old building's last salute."

<sup>12</sup> In this context, the term "mysteries" refers to secret initiation rites of the Classical world.

<sup>13</sup> James Jackson, *Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii* <<http://jccnet.johnco.cc.ks.us/~jjackson/villa.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Guest, "From Ziggurats to Curlicues: A Few Principle Features in the Art of General Idea," *General Idea 1968-1984* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1984) 19.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in General Idea, "'How our mascots love to humiliate us...' Revelations from the doghouse," *General Idea 1968-1984* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1984) 23.

<sup>16</sup> As defined in a satirical dictionary of "gay vocabulary", the poodle is "a high-camp hairstyle imposed on an otherwise undistinguished dog." Richard Summerbell, "A satirical dictionary," *The Body Politic* June 1983: 33.

<sup>17</sup> Vereschagin 31.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Decter, "The Theatrics of Dissemination: a General Idea Model," *General Idea Fin de Siècle*, ed. General Idea (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992) 21-22.

<sup>19</sup> Vereschagin 31.

<sup>20</sup> Vereschagin 31. Italics added.

<sup>21</sup> In *After Modern Art*, David Hopkins describes Julian Schnabel as an "essentially derivative painter" who "brashly revived the rhetoric of the macho artist-genius, specializing in painting fractured images over large surfaces covered with objects such as smashed crockery." Hopkins 208.

*Epilogue: The artist as ... Joker?*

Although unified by the poodle iconography, General Idea's artistic output in the early eighties – following the excavation of the ruins of the 1984 *Miss General Idea Pavillion* – was eclectic at best, uneven and uninspired at worst. However in 1985, General Idea were commissioned to produce a video for an Amsterdam festival entitled "Talking Back to the Media" and they found themselves once again in the familiar terrain of popular culture, producing the strongest video work of their career. The group's answer to "Talking Back to the Media" was *Shut the Fuck Up*, a fourteen-minute video that incorporates compelling clips from the classic 1960's "shockumentary" *Mondo Cane* and the popular *Batman* television series of the same period and juxtaposes them with the carefully scripted rantings of Jorge, Felix and AA performing the roles of the angry young man (as artist) and the refined and discerning aesthete (as poodle). The video is an exploration in three parts of how pop culture (represented by *Batman*), the popular press (represented by the *Sunday Times*) and the art world itself (represented by the notorious Yves Klein sequence from *Mondo Cane*) construct an image of the artist as either inspired genius or noble savage because it sells. The text that introduces the video explicitly states that what the viewer will be seeing is "a media cliché of the artist," but in their use of *Batman* and *Mondo Cane* as pop culture references, General Idea also introduce the discourse of Camp into this work. Before elaborating on how Camp and the performance of queer identities are incorporated into *Shut the Fuck Up*, I will first give an overview of the video's three parts.

Part one bears the enigmatic title "Death of a Mauve Bat" and consists of a scene from an episode of the 1960s *Batman* television series in which the Joker enters an art competition. The contestants include: Vincent van Gauche, who paints with his feet; a Jackson Pollock-style "action painter" with a cowboy hat; a man who pours paint into a wheelbarrow and lies in it; and a trained monkey who hurls paint at the canvas. Batman and Robin, in their civilian identities as

Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson, are shown in the audience observing the spectacle in disbelief. Knowing male art critics stop to appraise the work of each contestant and impart words of wisdom, but when they come before the Joker, they are dumbfounded. When asked to explain his blank canvas, the Joker replies that it is called *Death of a Mauve Bat* and that the bat is nowhere to be seen because “it died in 1936, a very bad year for bats.”<sup>1</sup> All that is left, according to the Joker, is the blank canvas, described as “symbolic” of the “emptiness of modern life.” At the end of the scene, the Joker claps and smiles deliriously as he is declared the winner of Gotham City’s art competition.

Part two of *Shut the Fuck Up*, titled “Mondo Cane”, begins with a choreographed sequence in which dancers dressed as poodles dance to a soundtrack of barking dogs while images of the day-glo poodles from the *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* series float across the screen. The scene changes and AA Bronson is shown reading an article in the *Sunday Times* about the popularity of American artist Julian Schnabel. He reads aloud as the article compares Schnabel to a “baby hippo” and a “Strasbourg goose,” to which Felix Partz responds: “Doesn’t matter what they say, AA – as long as they’re talking.” Cut to the next scene, and AA and Felix are wearing day-glo poodle wigs and holding cream puffs, praising poodles for their “desire to please.” Felix exclaims: “That’s us, AA! We know how to live and we know how to please. And there’s nothing that pleases the media more than an artist in artist’s drag.” They add: “Even when you’re not in drag, they still find a way to dress you up, even when they’re dressing you down.”<sup>2</sup>

Part three, “XXX Blue”, begins with a scene from the 1963 film *Mondo Cane* showing French artist Yves Klein presiding over the performance of a work called *Anthropométries*, in which he created a painting in front of an audience using the naked bodies of female models smeared with International Klein Blue paint. Klein appears in formal dress, directing the actions of the models

as they press their bodies up against the canvas, but he never comes into direct contact with the paint or the women.<sup>3</sup> The performance is accompanied by a group of musicians playing Klein's own *Monotone Symphony* – twenty minutes of one held tone interrupted by twenty minutes of silence.<sup>4</sup> The scene then switches to AA and Felix describing their own act of “performance painting”, *XXX Bleu*, a spoof of Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* executed in 1984 at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva. The gallery setting of General Idea's performance played the role of artist's studio, the theme song from the *Mondo Cane* film took the place of Klein's *Monotone Symphony*, and three stuffed poodles created for General Idea by a taxidermist played the part of Klein's nude female models. The three artists dipped their three poodles in vats of International Klein Blue and then ascended three ladders to paint three gigantic blue “X”s on three enormous canvases, using the poodles as paintbrushes.

The bizarre spectacle of Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* is appropriated three times: first by the makers of the film *Mondo Cane*; then by General Idea when they stage a parody of it in their performance of *XXX Bleu*; and again when General Idea lift the Klein sequence from *Mondo Cane* for *Shut the Fuck Up* (an appropriation of an appropriation). *Mondo Cane* is the notorious 1963 “shockumentary”, considered a classic of its genre, that was nominated for awards, made a fortune and led to dozens of similar films – both authentic and staged – with *Mondo* titles. *Mondo Cane* shows various “exotic” rites and rituals practiced in cultures around the world – from Pasadena, California to the Trobriand archipelago – in an effort to prove that the world has indeed “gone to the dogs” (the film's title translates as “World of Dogs”). Taken out of its original cultural context as art, Klein's *Anthropométries* is appropriated by the filmmakers and exploited for its supposed “shock value”, given the same weight as scenes of wealthy New Yorkers eating beetles and Italian villagers shredding their legs with broken glass on Good Friday.

For *Shut the Fuck Up*, General Idea play upon both *Mondo Cane*'s associations to 1960s popular Camp and Yves Klein's (in)famous artistic persona. In *The Rise of the Sixties*, Thomas Crow explains that Klein was known for his relentless self-promotion and grandiosity and presented himself as "a shaman who called his works into being, deploying the fundamental elements of creation, rather than prosaically painting or sculpting them."<sup>5</sup> Klein adopted this persona of artist-as-shaman without a trace of irony and in his *Anthropométries* he took this exaggerated cult of self to an extreme, manipulating the bodies of women from a distance and reducing them to mere tools for the physical realization of his artistic vision. Yves Klein is thus an ideal target for General Idea's ongoing parodic critique of the masculinist myth of the artist as visionary creator. In *XXX Bleu*, General Idea perform a travesty of the exalted act of artistic creation: the act of three men with three poodles painting on three canvases undermines the idea of art as the product of a single, solitary genius, and the substitution of stuffed poodles for nubile young women disrupts and destabilizes the phallogentric construct of the artist as virile, potent creator. (Perhaps most unsettling is the possibility that, in this cultural context that we inhabit and that General Idea were so fond of critiquing, the sight of a man directing the actions of a group of naked women seems somehow less shocking and strange to us than a group of gay men making their artistic mark with stuffed poodles.) In using the theme song of *Mondo Cane* as the soundtrack for *XXX Bleu*, General Idea poke fun at the artist's (Yves Klein in particular, but also artists in general) bloated sense of self-importance by reminding the viewer of the degraded context in which Klein's work was introduced to the public at large.

Given that General Idea produced this video for a festival called "Talking Back to the Media," we might well assume that *Shut the Fuck Up* is a rallying cry of sorts, the unambiguous response of artists to the manipulations and distortions of the media. In fact, it is quite the opposite. In

both form and content, *Shut the Fuck Up* is an acknowledgement of the mutually appropriative and *productive* relations between “high” and “mass” culture that flourished in the sixties and became firmly entrenched in the post-Pop era. Pop Art’s blurring of the boundaries that once separated “high” and “low” shaped General Idea as artists and informed their work throughout their career, from the early beauty pageants and the publication of *FILE Magazine* to *Shut the Fuck Up* and the popular manifestations (posters, stamps and other multiples) of the *AIDS Project*.

The clip from the *Batman* television series offers a humourous look at popular clichés of the artist taken to an extreme: the artist as “trained monkey” hurling paint at the canvas; the artist as eccentric immersing himself (literally) in his painting; and most pointedly for General Idea themselves, the artist as “Joker”, producing work that no one understands and yet convincing the public of its transcendent value through verbal smoke and mirrors. Seen within the larger context of General Idea’s body of work, with its abiding interest in processes of masking and unmasking, the *Batman* sequence also reads as a playful way for G.I. to introduce the question of queer identity through the closeted figures of Batman and Robin and the openly queer figure of the Joker. Moreover, because the *Batman* television series was one of the most popular, visible and talked-about manifestations of the mainstream appropriation of Camp in the 1960s, its inclusion in G.I.’s video raises the issue of Camp and its relation to capital “P” Pop (Art) and small “p” pop (culture).<sup>6</sup> The series is widely understood as a product of the mutually appropriative relations of “high” and “mass” culture in postwar America. Visually, *Batman* owes much to Roy Lichtenstein, with its bright cartoony colours and shapes and the POWs and KA-BOOMs that always appeared during the fight scenes but, of course, Lichtenstein in particular and Pop in general had appropriated that visual vocabulary from comic books in the first place.

Like many other comic book superheroes, Batman and Robin lead secret double lives, maintaining a precarious balancing act between their “civilian” identities and their secret identities as crime fighters. Unlike Superman or Spiderman, however, Batman and Robin are coded “gay” in the minds of many readers/viewers because of an extensive discourse around their ambiguous sexual identities that began in the early 1950s.<sup>7</sup> If we agree with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s assertion in *Epistemology of the Closet* that closetedness of any kind always contains within it at least an allusion to problems of homo/hetero definition as it raises issues of secrecy and disclosure, then the presence of Batman and Robin in *Shut the Fuck Up* lends itself to a queer reading. But in the clip that General Idea chose to appropriate for their video, the closeted figures of Batman and Robin barely make a cameo appearance, appearing in “civilian” dress as members of the audience at the Gotham City art competition. Their attention, and ours too, is focused on the star of the show – the Joker. Without question, the Joker is a queer figure and, unlike Batman, he has no use for a closet. With no straight or “civilian” identity to hide behind, the Joker is unabashedly Camp. Flamboyant, ironic and witty, his pink suit, green pompadour, white makeup and red lipstick mark him as an openly queer figure – not only in the sense of being “anti-straight”, but also in the sense of being “anti-normal”. Of all the artistic personas lampooned in the *Batman* sequence, the figure of the Joker is the one that most closely embodies General Idea’s collective identity.

In card games, Jokers are wild – their value is not stable or static. In *Shut the Fuck Up*, the Joker is a conceptual artist of sorts, presenting a blank canvas to conservative art critics and explaining it as “symbolic of the emptiness of modern life.” Although traditionally occupying the role of villain or outsider in the *Batman* series, the Joker infiltrates Gotham’s high society (the ruling class) and wins the art contest through his charm, humour and powers of verbal persuasion. In

doing so, he can be seen as being both complicit and critical – cooperating with the dominant order *and* subverting it from within. Of all the personas, mascots and alter egos adopted by General Idea throughout their career, the Joker is the one that seems like the best fit. Whether posing as poodles or promoting the idea of the artist as drag queen, the three men of General Idea were happy to play the role of queer outsider to the art world's "straight man", as the following exchange in *The Body Politic* makes clear:

*Jorge: I think we're conscious that we're viewed as a coven of three fags, three gay warlocks messing about with things.*

*AA: Do you like that image?*

*Felix: Yes, I love it.*<sup>8</sup>

There is a risk involved in playing with dominant stereotypes in order to subvert them, and that is that at some point those stereotypes may become too clichéd to function as any kind of meaningful representation. AA Bronson acknowledges this in *The Body Politic*, stating: "By flaunting all those stupid clichés of faggotry, I think there are a lot of people who would say we are reinforcing them. A lot of people feel that our work contributes to incorrect ideas about gayness, or capitalism, or wealth."<sup>9</sup> It is in the very nature of irony and Camp – as signifying practices that generate doubled or multiple meanings – that the meanings they produce are not stable, decidable, complete, closed, innocent, or transparent. Camp, in particular, can never satisfy those who like their political and cultural critique explicit, unambiguous and uncompromising. Like the Joker in *Shut the Fuck Up*, Camp is wild, unpredictable, shuttling back and forth between the margins and the centre. Relying heavily on the strategies of irony and Camp, General Idea's body of work is marked by this same ambiguity and lack of closure. It advances a critique of the dominant order, while at the same time maintaining a familiar and non-threatening front. The criticism may be implied or covert, but it is still present, still waiting to be discerned and activated by a receptive audience.



A collaborative venture sprung from the countercultural ideals and obsessions of the 1960s and ending in the international art scene of the early 1990s, General Idea described themselves as “straining for subversion within complicity” – seeking to question and undermine both artistic and social norms all the while working within established art institutions and structures.

Performing the role of queer outsiders within a predominantly heterosexual Canadian art community, General Idea and their collaborators carved out a space for themselves that was beyond both straight and gay mainstreams. From a practical perspective, it allowed them to gain visibility as artists, while at the same time signalling their differential status and adopting a rebellious, “anti-establishment” stance. In their art, the group seized upon two key concerns of the sexual identity politics of their time: the question of visibility and the role it plays in shaping a social identity. Through such projects as *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* and the excavation of poodle fragments from the ruins of the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, General Idea created and circulated queer identities – *enacted* queer identities through the visual and performative signifying practices of Camp. In adopting pseudonyms, fictive identities and gender-bending, shape-shifting disguises, General Idea and their collaborators aligned themselves with a lineage of avant-garde art practitioners such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol and defined themselves in opposition to what was still a largely conservative Canadian art scene. Rejecting the heroic model of artistic selfhood prevalent among many Canadian artists who never quite caught the Pop and Camp fever that spread in America’s collective consciousness in the ‘60s, General Idea and the rest of the Eternal Network frustrated expectations and left some critics cold with their superficial, ironic and, at times, vacuous personas.

General Idea articulated a self-conscious form of identity marked by artificiality, ambiguity and a

*gaieté de coeur* that worked against prevailing notions of intellectual rigour and seriousness in Conceptual Art and notions of political responsibility in the Gay Liberation Movement. As AA Bronson explained in *The Body Politic*, the trio recognized the subversive potential of humour and silliness in a context where playfulness is deemed both “not masculine” and “not serious art”. General Idea played with both the closeted, repressed sexuality of Conceptualism and the explicit, confrontational sexuality of the gay movement and ultimately embraced neither. Relying heavily on the politics and poetics of Camp, General Idea performed and constructed queer identities rooted in a concept of the Self as performative, provisional and situational. These identities found their visual and verbal expression in the gender-blurring performative strategies of drag, the appropriation and redesignation of the “leftovers” of popular culture, and the ambiguity of ironic speech. Camp allowed General Idea to attain visibility in the art world while at the same time thematizing their “difference” from the mainstream. It enabled them to be both insiders and outsiders, to have their cake and eat it too. Neither wholly critical nor wholly complicit, the work of General Idea can be read as both a frustrating act of negation and a liberating act of creation, for with the refusal of definition and closure also comes the opening up of possibilities.

---

<sup>1</sup> General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up* (produced for “Talking Back to the Media” symposium, Amsterdam), video, colour, sound, 14 minutes, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*.

<sup>3</sup> Yves Klein once declared: “I no longer dirtied myself with color, not even the tips of my fingers.” Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996) 122. Crow observes that Klein’s formal dress in this context “unwittingly evoked a sex-club master of ceremonies.” Crow 122.

<sup>4</sup> Crow 123.

<sup>5</sup> Crow 120.

<sup>6</sup> It is also said that, although the characters of Batman and Robin went through a process of “redemptive

---

heterosexualization” in the comic books of the 1950s, they became “re-gayed” in the move to the ‘60s TV series, because the show was popularly perceived as “campy.” Sasha Torres, “The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the *Batman* Television Series,” *Pop Out Queer Warhol*, eds. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley and José Esteban Muñoz. (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 238-255.

<sup>7</sup> It has been argued convincingly by straight and queer critics alike that Batman’s origin story (another convention of the comic book genre) and the relationship of his secret identity to his civilian identity mark him as a queer figure. For a detailed analysis of this argument, see the excellent essay by Sasha Torres cited above.

<sup>8</sup> Vereschagin 31.

<sup>9</sup> Vereschagin 32.

## Works Cited

- Art Gallery of Ontario. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Toronto: AGO, 1997.
- Ballantyne, Robert. "Glamour, Pageantry and Knives: Gay Identity in *File Magazine*." Diss. U of British Columbia, 1994.
- Bayer, Fern. "The Search for the Spirit." *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Art Gallery of Ontario. Toronto: AGO, 1997. 10-12.
- . "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968 – 1975." *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 – 1975*. Art Gallery of Ontario. Toronto: AGO, 1997. 22-115.
- Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 106-43.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. 270-282.
- Cole, Susan G. "General art Idea." *NOW* 2-8 May 1985: 9.
- Collison, Robert. "Party of three." *Saturday Night* Sept. 1995: 85-90.
- Cooper, Emmanuel. *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Crow, Thomas. *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.
- Danzker, Jo-Anne Birnie. "Culture Criminals: This Is the Frame of Reference." *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Ed. AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984. v-vii.

- Dault, Gary Michael. "3 trendy young men market themselves." *Toronto Star* 3 Nov. 1975: D8.
- Davy, Kate. "Fe/Male Impersonation: The discourse of Camp." *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. Ed. Moe Meyer. London: Routledge, 1994. 130-148.
- Debord, Guy. "Détournement as Negation and Prelude." 1959. *Post-Pop Art*. Ed. Paul Taylor. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989. 7-9.
- Decter, Joshua. "The Theatrics of Dissemination: a General Idea Model." *General Idea Fin de Siècle*. Ed. General Idea. Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992. 15-25.
- Doyle, Jennifer. "Tricks of the Trade: Pop Art/Pop Sex." *Pop Out Queer Warhol*. Ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 191-209.
- "Effete." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- "FILE: The Great Canadian Art Tragedy." *The Grape* 24-30 May 1972: n. pag.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- General Idea. "Borderline Cases." 1973. *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Ed. AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984. 50-69.
- . "Glamour." 1975. *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Ed. AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984. 76-89.
- . "'How our mascots love to humiliate us ...' Revelations from the doghouse." *General Idea 1968 – 1984*. Ed. General Idea and Jan Debbaut. Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1984. 23-40.
- . *Shut the Fuck Up* (produced for "Talking Back to the Media" symposium, Amsterdam). 1985. Video, colour, sound, 14 min.

- . "Three Heads Are Better ... ." 1978. *General Idea's 1984 and the 1968 – 1984 FILE Retrospective*. Ed. AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal. Toronto and Vancouver: Art Official Inc. and Vancouver Art Gallery, 1984. 96-105.
- Guest, Tim. "From Ziggurats to Curlicues: A Few Principle Features in the Art of General Idea." *General Idea 1968-1984*. Ed. General Idea and Jan Debbaut. Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1984.
- Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1987.
- hooks, bell. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992. 21-39.
- Hopkins, David. *After Modern Art: 1945 – 2000*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Jackson, Ed. "Introduction." *Flaunting It! A decade of gay journalism from The Body Politic*. Ed. Ed Jackson and Stan Persky. Toronto: Pink Triangle Press, 1982. 1-6.
- Jackson, James. *Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii*. 12 Dec. 2000  
<<http://jccnet.johnco.cc.ks.us/~jjackson/villa.html>>.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- King, Thomas A. "Performing 'Akimbo': Queer pride and epistemological prejudice." *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. Ed. Moe Meyer. London: Routledge, 1994. 23-50.
- Mays, John Bentley. "General Idea." *Open Letter* 2<sup>nd</sup> series, no.8 (Summer 1974): 5-36.
- . "Must We Burn General Idea?" *Vanguard* Nov. 1984: 10-15.
- . "Old building's last salute an artful bang." *Globe and Mail* 11 July 1981.
- . "The Snakes in the Garden: The Self and the City in Contemporary Canadian Art." *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*. Ed. Robert Bringham et al. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983. 157-191.

- Meehan, Thomas. "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste – It's 'Camp.'" *New York Times Magazine* 21 Mar. 1965: 30+.
- Meyer, Moe. "Introduction: Reclaiming the discourse of Camp." *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. Ed. Moe Meyer. London: Routledge, 1994. 1-22.
- . "Under the Sign of Wilde: An archaeology of posing." *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. Ed. Moe Meyer. London: Routledge, 1994. 75-109.
- Miller, D.A. "Anal Rope." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991. 119-141.
- Miss America Organization. *The Official Site of The Miss America Organization*. 5 Nov. 2000 <<http://www.missamerica.org>>.
- Monk, Philip. "Colony, Commodity and Copyright: Reference and Self-Reference in Canadian Art." 1983. *Struggles with the Image: Essays in Art Criticism*. Toronto: YYZ Books, 1988. 91-108.
- . "Editorials: General Idea and the Myth of Inhabitation." 1983. *Struggles with the Image: Essays in Art Criticism*. Toronto: YYZ Books, 1988. 131-182.
- Moon, Michael. "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion." *Tendencies*. By Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972.
- Ross, Andrew. "Uses of Camp." *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 135-170.
- Scott, Jay. "Going Through the Notions." *Canadian Art* (Fall 1984): 78-83.
- Selz, Peter. "The Flaccid Art." *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*. Ed. Carol Anne Mahusen. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989. 77-82. Rpt. of "Pop Goes the Artist." *Partisan Review* Summer 1963.

- Sharpe, David. *Rochdale: The Runaway College*. 4 Dec. 2000 <<http://write-sight.com/wordshop/rochdale.htm>>.
- Silver, Kenneth E. "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art." *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*. Ed. Russell Ferguson. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992. 178-203.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966.
- Suárez, Juan A. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.
- Summerbell, Richard. "A satirical dictionary." *The Body Politic* June 1983: 32-33.
- Sutnik, Maia-Mari. *A Practical Dreamer: The Photographs of Man Ray*. Toronto: AGO, 2000.
- Tatchell, Peter. "It's Just a Phase: Why Homosexuality is Doomed." *Anti-Gay*. Ed. Mark Simpson. London: Freedom Editions, 1996. 35-54.
- Thody, Philip, and Ann Course. *Barthes for Beginners*. Ed. Richard Appignanesi. Cambridge: Icon Books, 1997.
- Tom of Finland Museum en Español*. 10 Mar. 2001  
<<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Stonewall/3415/coleccion.html>>.
- Torres, Sasha. "The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the *Batman* Television Series." *Pop Out Queer Warhol*. Ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 238-255.
- Trollope, Paul. "Toronto cops raid gay bath, charge 28 men." *The Body Politic* Feb. 1979: 12-13.
- Vereschagin, David. "What's the Big Idea?" *The Body Politic* June 1985: 29-32.
- Warner, Michael, ed. "Introduction." *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.



- Watson, Scott. "Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive." *Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive*. UBC Fine Arts Gallery. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1994. 5-28.
- Whiting, Cécile. *A Taste For Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.



Figure 1. Cover of *FILE Magazine*, Autumn 1975.



Figure 2. General Idea, *Ideas Are Easy*, *FILE Magazine*, April 15 1972.



Figure 3. General Idea, *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Poster*, 1971.





Figure 4. General Idea, *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia: A Mural Fragment from the Room with the Unknown Function in the Villa dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1982.



Figure 5. General Idea, spread from "Women's Pages," *FILE Magazine*, May/June 1972.



Figure 6. Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1973.

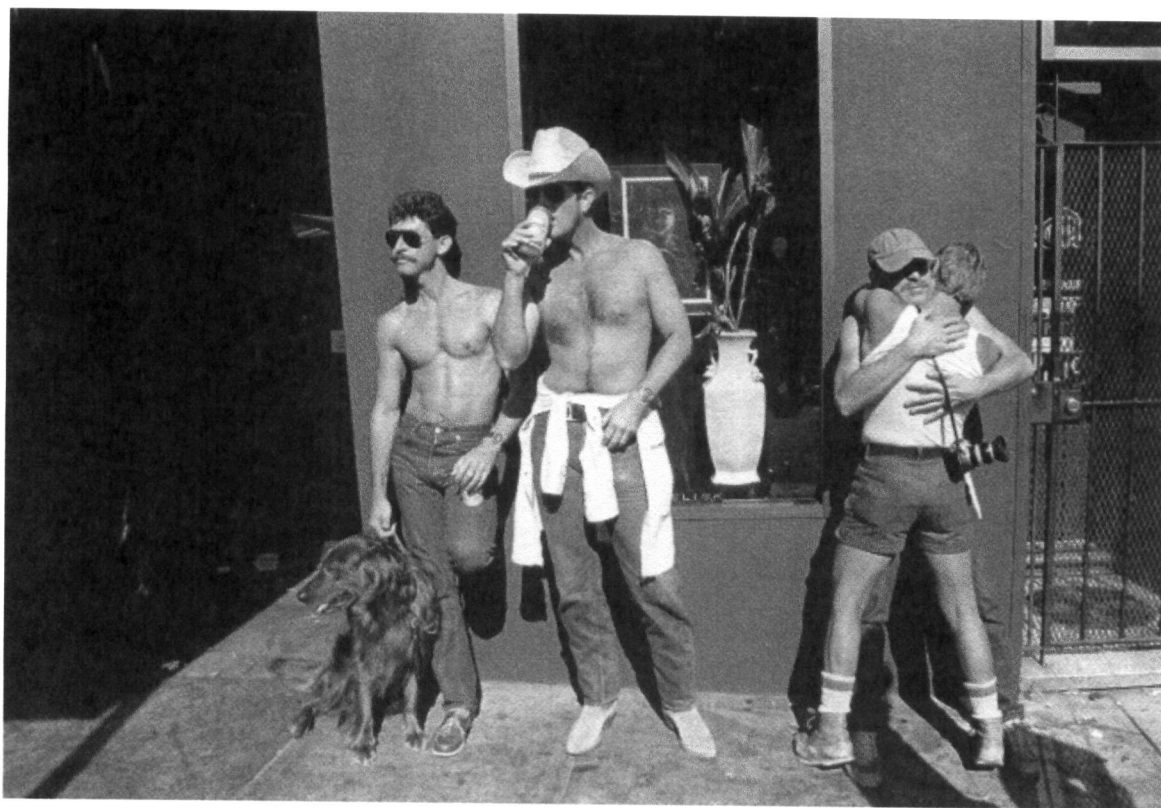


Figure 7. Fred W. McDarrah and Timothy S. McDarrah, *Spectators at the Castro Street Fair*, 1981.





Figure 8. Vincent Trasov et al, *Mr. Peanut with Art Rat and Candy Man* (excerpt from the Mr. Peanut mayoralty campaign), 1974.



Figure 9. Rodney Werden, *Portrait of General Idea*, 1974.



Figure 10. Vincent Trasov, *Marcel Dot* - 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant entry, 1971.





Figure 11. An example of “glamour drag,” female impersonator Skip Arnold as he appears in Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 1972.



Figure 12. General Idea, *Untitled*, Sandy Stagg models *The Miss General Idea Shoe* and the *Hand of the Spirit* against the backdrop of *Luxon V.B.*, 1973-74.

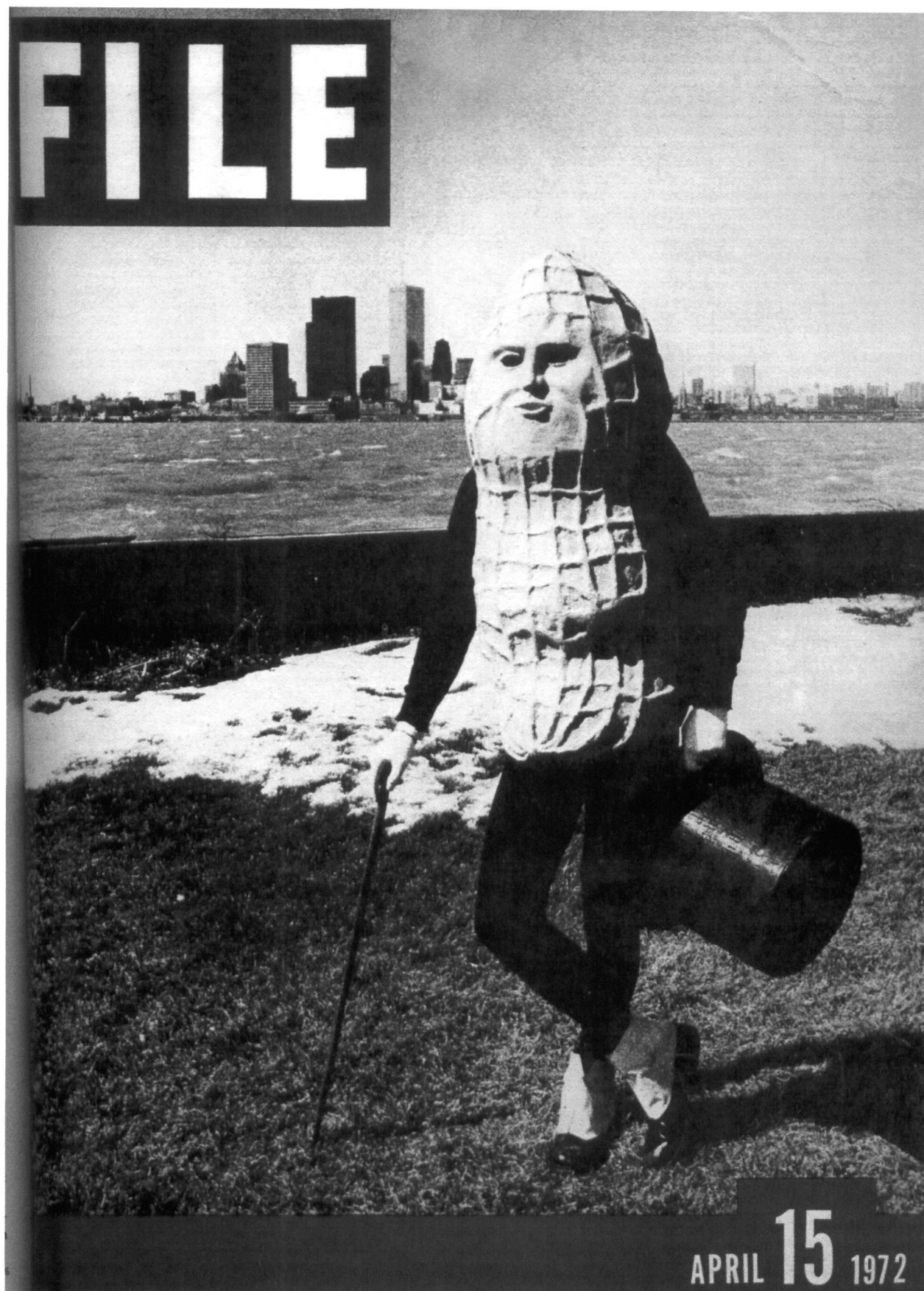


Figure 13. Cover of the first issue of *FILE Magazine*, April 15 1972.



Figure 14. Michael Morris, *Vincent Trasov* - 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant entry, 1971.



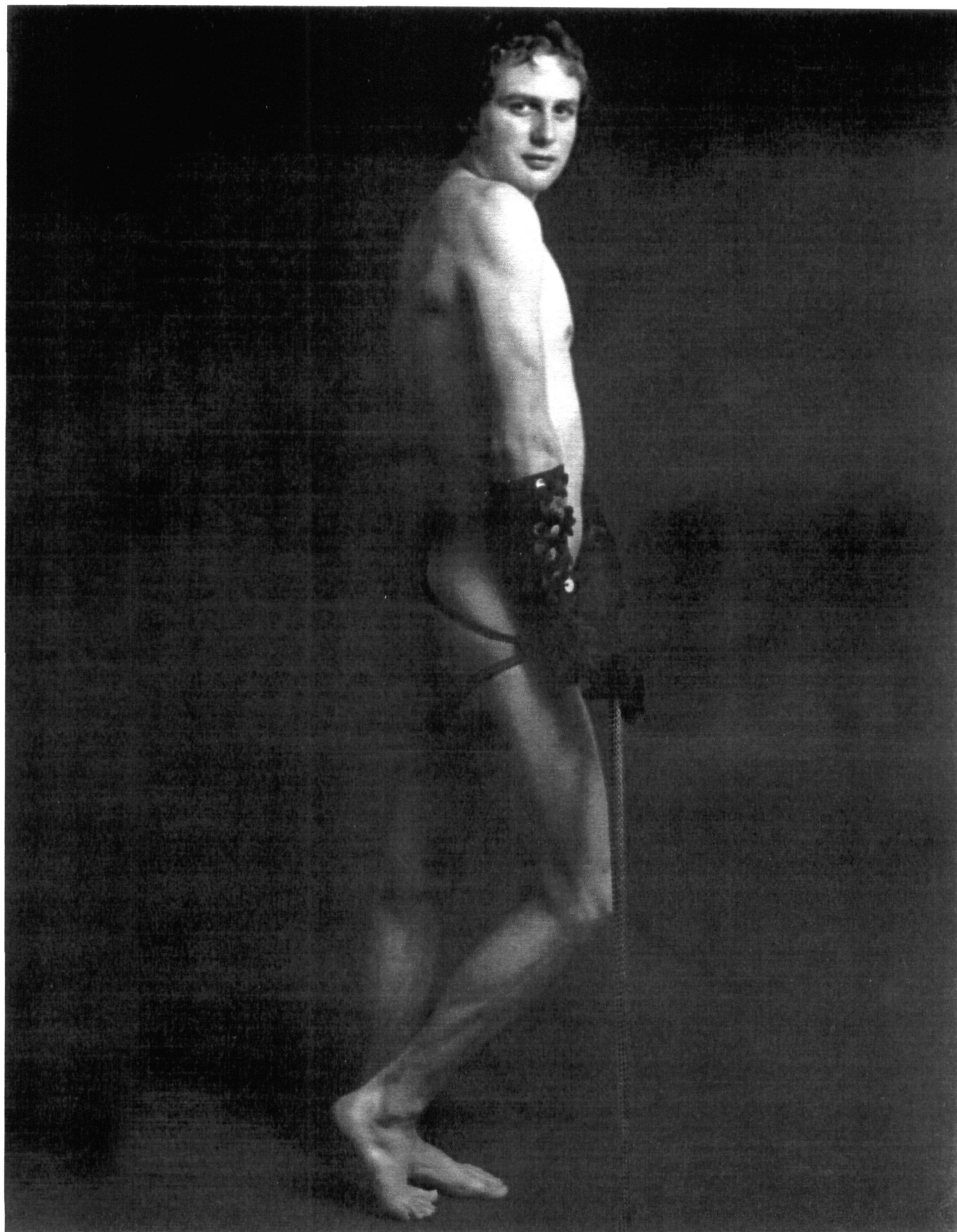


Figure 15. Michael Morris, *Vincent Trasov - 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant entry*, 1971.





Figure 16. Donatello, *David*, c. 1440.

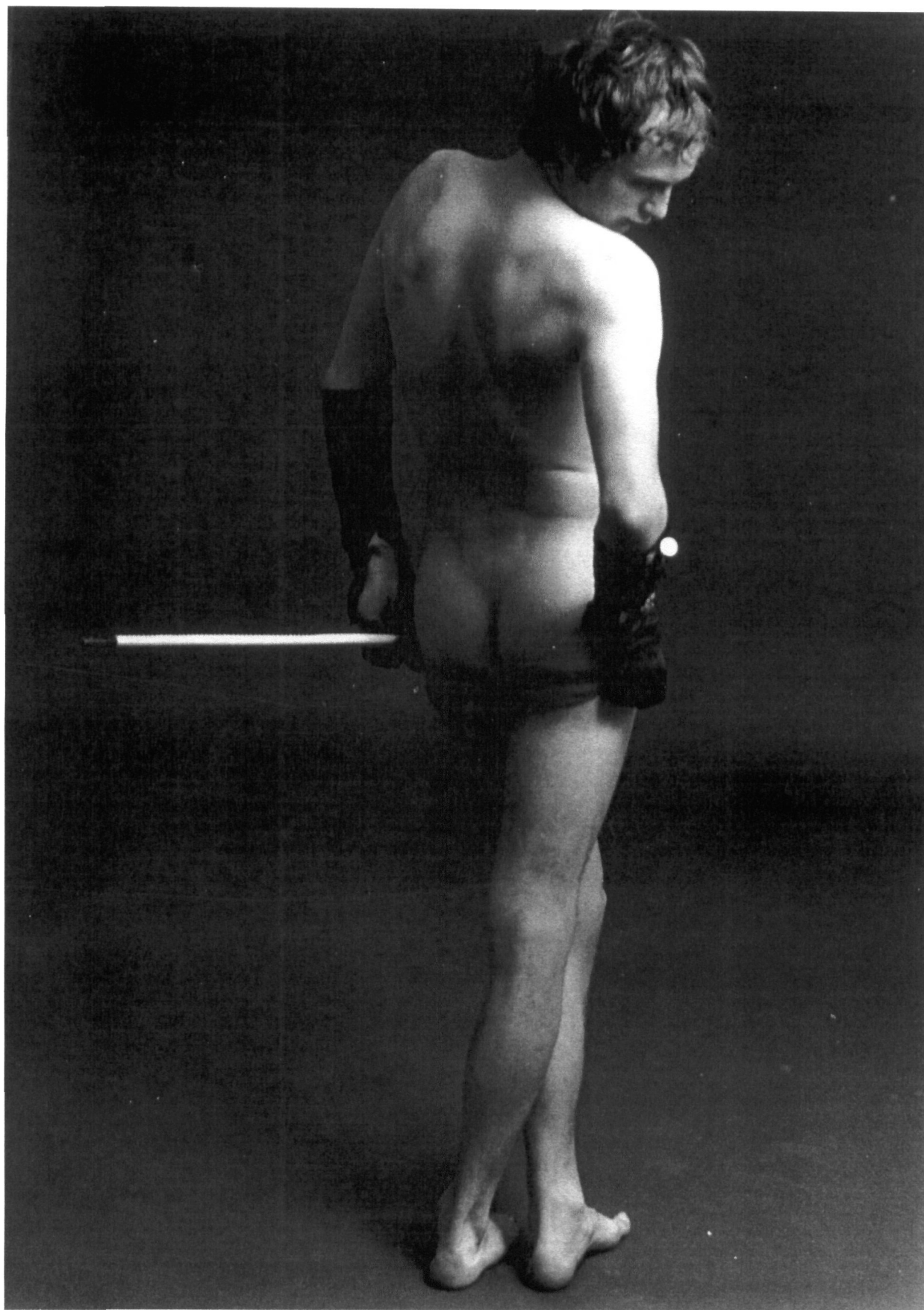


Figure 17. Michael Morris, *Vincent Trasov - 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant entry*, 1971.



Figure 18. Man Ray, *Rose Sélavy*, 1923.



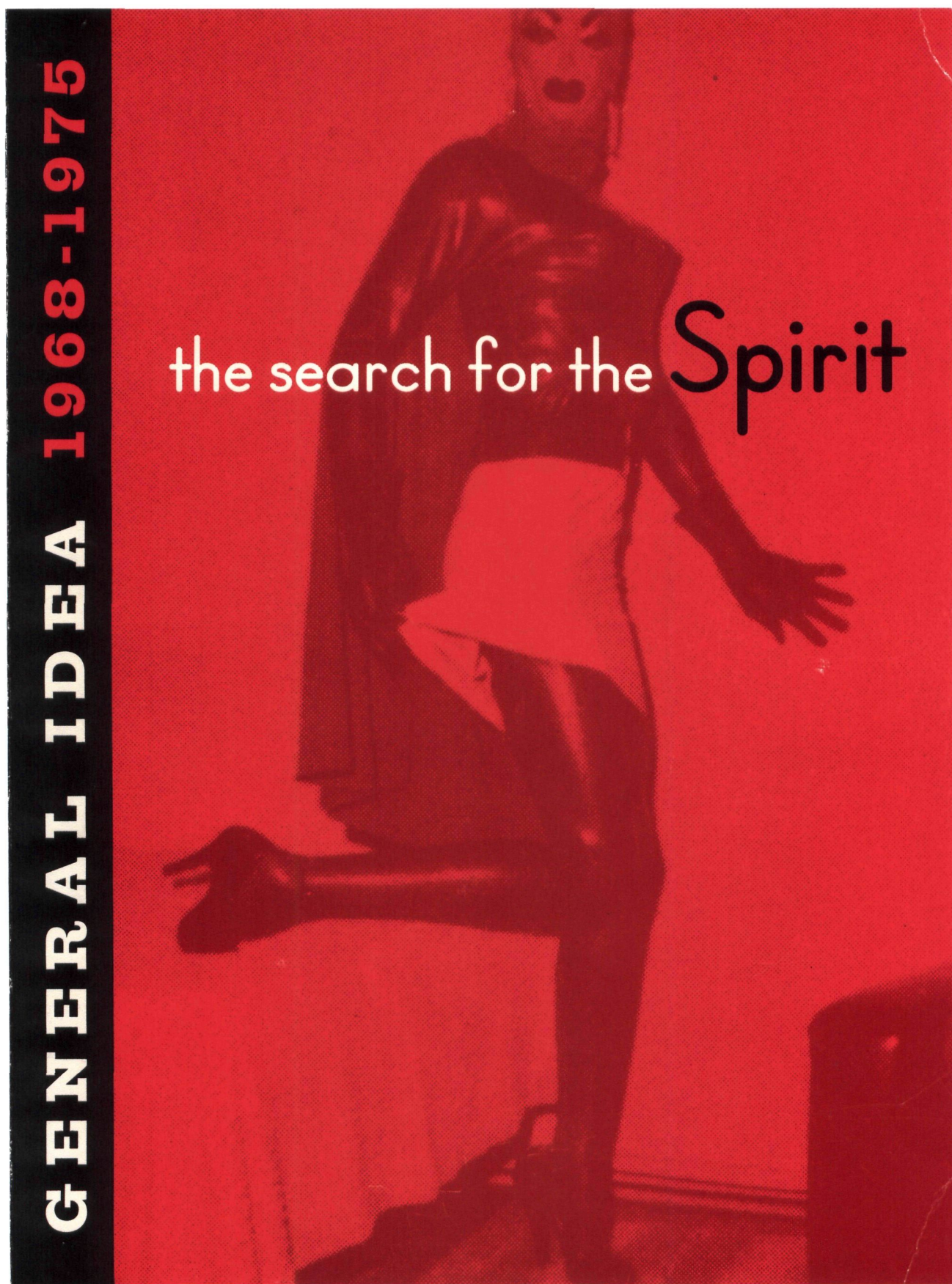


Figure 19. Cover of AGO catalogue for *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (*The Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*).



Figure 20. *Untitled*, photo of audience rehearsal, *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, 1978.



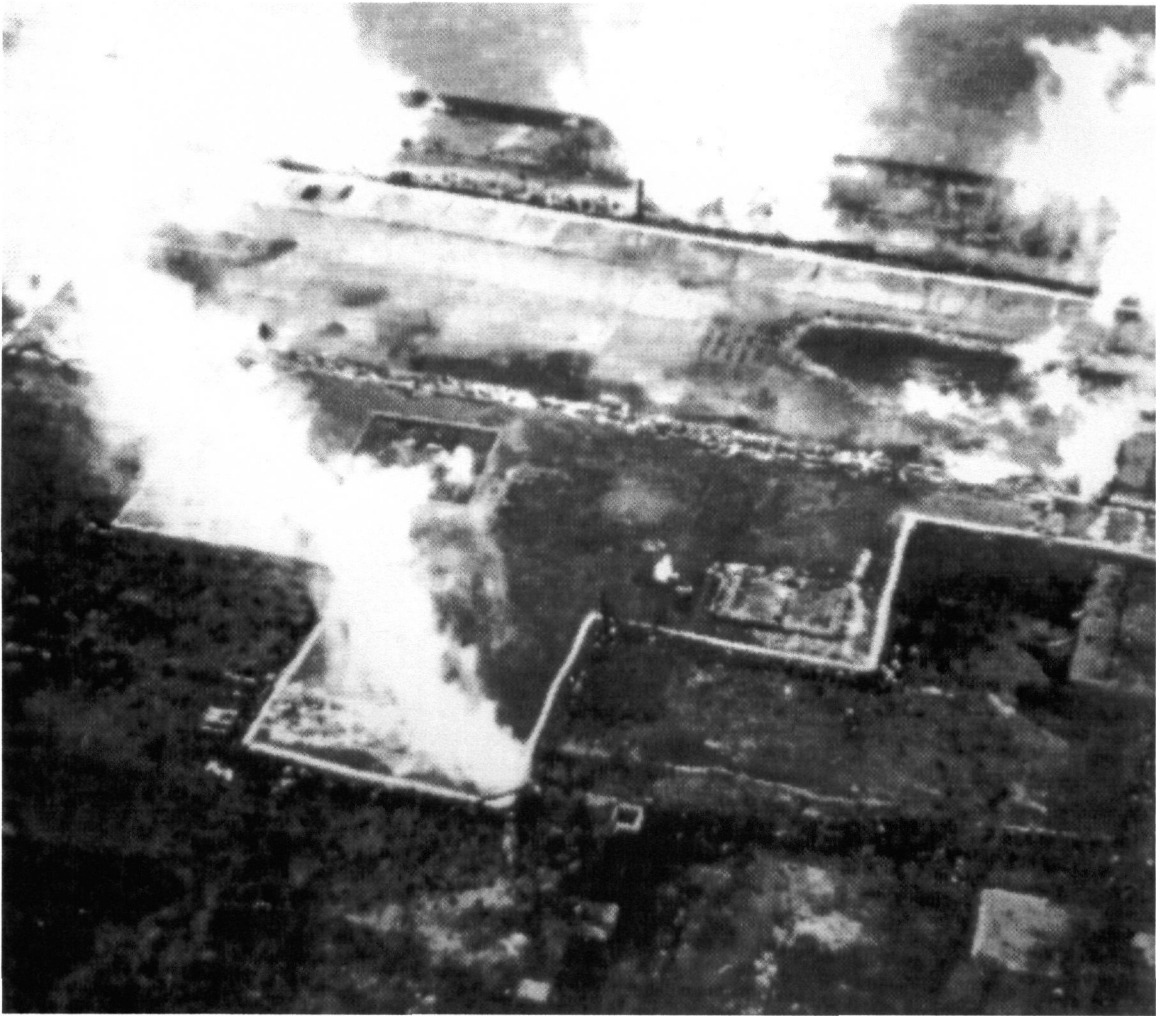


Figure 21. General Idea, *The Ruins of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1977.

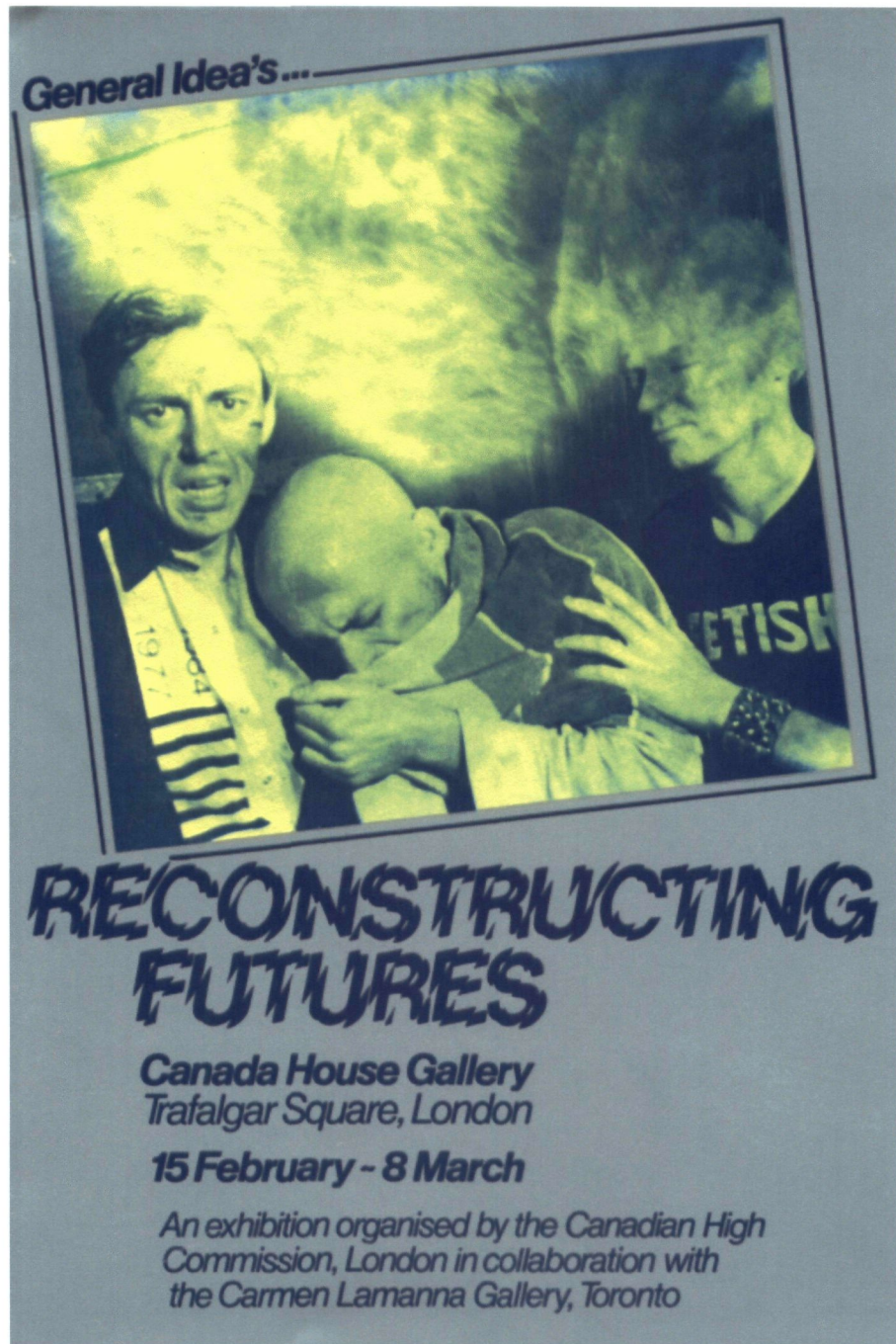


Figure 22. General Idea, Invitation for *Reconstructing Futures*, 1978.



Figure 23. General Idea, *Toronto's Fault: The First Tremors* (*The Ruins of the Silver Bar from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*), 1981.





Figure 24. General Idea, cover of *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* Issue, *FILE* Magazine, 1983.